BARCLAY OF THE GUIDES

BY

HERBERT STRANG

HUMPHREY·MILFORD
OXFORD·UNIVERSITY
·PRESS·
LONDON

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BY HERBERT STRANG

HUMPHREY MILFORD
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PREFACE

The great Mutiny embraced so wide an area, in which momentous events happened almost simultaneously in places far apart, that it seemed advisable to confine the historical background of this story to the siege of Delhi, the city which was the heart of the rebellion. In regard to the historical persons introduced, care has been taken to adhere as closely as possible to facts; and, where the romancer's licence must needs put words into their mouths, to conform to probability and their known characters. If the boys who read these pages should care to know more of the great men of whom they get glimpses, they will find a store of good things in *Lumsden of the Guides*, by Sir Peter Lumsden and George R. Elsmie; the *Memoirs of Sir Henry Daly*, by Major H. Daly; *A Leader of Light Horse* (Hodson), and the *Life of John Nicholson*, both by Lieut.-Colonel Trotter. The history of the Mutiny, as related in the pages of Kaye and Malleson, will never lose its fascination.

HERBERT STRANG

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CHAPTER THE FIRST

The Raid

Ahmed, son of Rahmut Khan, chief of the village of Shagpur, was making his lonely way through the hills some three miles above his home. He could see the walled village perched on a little tract of grassy land just where the base of the hills met the sandy plain. It was two thousand feet or more below him, and he could almost count the flat-topped houses clustered beyond his father's tower, which, though actually it rose to some height above them, dominating them, and affording an outlook over miles and miles of the plain, yet appeared to Ahmed, at his present altitude, merely a patch in the general level.

Between him and the village lay three miles of grey rugged hill country, scarred with watercourses, and almost void of vegetation. A mile away, indeed, there was a long stretch of woodland, lying like a great green smudge upon the monotony of grey. It was a patch of irregular shape, narrowing here, broadening there, filling a valley which bent round towards the village. Ahmed was accustomed to shoot there occasionally, but he preferred the more exciting and more dangerous sport of hunting on the hills, where he might stalk his quarry from crag to crag, leaping ravines, swarming up abrupt and precipitous cliffs, always in peril of a fall that might break his limbs even if it did not crash the life out of him. For Ahmed was of a daring disposition, fearless, undauntable, yet possessed of a certain coolness of judgment by which he had hitherto brought himself unscathed through sixteen years of adventurous boyhood.

He was a tall, slim, lissom fellow, with very black hair and a swarthy skin, which set off the spotless white of his turban. He wore the loose frock and baggy trousers of the country. Yet one observing him would have marked certain differences between his features and those of the Pathans among whom he dwelt. His nose was arched, but it was thinner than was usual among his countrymen. His lips were not so thick as theirs, nor was his mouth so large, and his eyes, instead of coal-black, were of a curious steely-

grey. And any one who saw him bathing with the lads of his village (itself a strange pastime, for the hill-men have no great partiality for water) would have been struck by the paleness of his skin where it was protected from the sun and the weather. The observer's conclusion would probably have been that Ahmed was a Pathan of a particularly refined type, and in all likelihood an offshoot of some noble family which time's vicissitudes had reduced.

Ahmed stood for a few moments looking down at Shagpur, then turned to pursue his way. He had a fowling-piece slung at his back; his intention was to ascend the hills for perhaps another thousand feet, to a spot where he would probably come upon a small herd of black-buck. But he had not mounted far from the place at which he had paused when he halted again, and, putting his left hand above his eyes to shield them from the sun's rays, gazed steadily in a direction away from the village. Below him the plain stretched for many miles, bare and desolate, though when the rains came by and by it would be clothed with verdure. Scarcely a tree broke its level, and so parched was it now that no beast could have found sustenance there. But far away Ahmed's keen eye had descried what appeared to be a speck upon the horizon, and he watched it intently.

There was nothing unusual in the sight itself. Many a time he had seen just such a speck in the sky, watched it grow in breadth and height, until it stretched across the plain like an immense wall, thirty miles long, a thousand feet high. He had seen it approach like a monstrous phantom, driving before it, as it were, circling flights of kites and vultures, enveloping the bases of the hills, shutting out the sun with yellow scudding clouds. But such a dust-storm ordinarily swept over the plain southwards: Ahmed had never seen one approach from the west; and after a long and steady gaze at the speck, which grew slowly in size, he suddenly dropped his hand, uttered an exclamation in the Pashtu tongue, and turning his back began to retrace his course, at a speed vastly greater than that at which he had formerly been moving, towards his distant village.

The moving speck had resolved itself into a band of horsemen. They had been too far away for him to distinguish individuals and know who and what they were; but, considering the quarter from which they were coming, his instant thought was that they were an enemy, and it behoved him to give his people warning. In that wild country of the border raids were frequent

enough. Especially was a warning necessary to-day, for the village was in poor condition to defend itself. Only the day before, Rahmut Khan, his father, had ridden out with all the younger men to raid horses on the British frontier. Ahmed shrewdly suspected that tidings of this expedition had been conveyed to Minghal Khan, the chief's inveterate enemy and rival, and Minghal had taken advantage of it to make the attack for which he had no doubt long awaited a favourable occasion. And what occasion could be more favourable than the absence of the old warrior on an enterprise from which, if at once successful, he could not return for five or six days, and which, if he found himself at first baulked in it, might occupy him for a fortnight?

Ahmed was well aware of the danger in which Shagpur lay. The village had a high wall; but he had no belief that the gates could withstand the assault of a determined enemy. It would be something to the good, however, if the assailants could be checked for a time, and they might be checked by the shutting of the gates. But the villagers could not see from the walls the advancing band; unless there was some one on the tower, or Ahmed himself should give warning, the enemy would be upon them before the gates could be closed, and then it would be a tale of rapine and massacre. He knew that, make what speed he might, he could not, if he followed the way he had come, reach the village before the mounted men. The only chance was to gain the wood, through which, being on a level, he could run fleetly. Swerving, therefore, from the direct line to the village, Ahmed scrambled down the rough hillside, leaping little chasms, springing from rock to rock with the agility of a mountain goat, yet with circumspection, for should he miss his footing a sprained ankle would be the least of his mishaps, and Shagpur was lost.

Down and down he went, stumbling, slipping, barking his shins, but never heeding such slight mishaps so long as nothing brought him to a check. And now, just as the dark woodland seems at his very feet, he pulls up with a sudden cry of "Hai!" for in front of him there yawns a ravine, four or five paces across, and many feet deep. He glances to either side: a little to the left it narrows slightly, but only by reason of a jagged spit of rock that juts out—a spit so small as barely to afford resting-place to a foot. At every other spot the ravine is even wider than where he was brought to a halt. He waits but a moment—long enough to reflect that he dare not go the toilsome

way round, lest he arrive too late; and then, setting his teeth and clenching his fingers so tightly that the nails press deep into his palms, he takes a leap. Misjudgment of the distance by an inch would dash him into the chasm below; but practice has given him perfect command of his muscles; he springs lightly, confidently; his right foot lands on the precariously narrow spit of rock, and as he stoops his body he brings the left foot against the right; then, just as it would seem that the momentum of his flight must cause him to sway and stagger and topple over sideways, he rises as on springs to his full height, and with another effort of his well-trained muscles he hurls himself from the spit on to the broader ledge behind, and is safe.

Panting as he was, Ahmed sped off without delay. At last he reached the edge of the wood; he plunged into it, and finding a track which he had often followed, he ran easily as a deer. When he emerged at the other end, he dashed across the fields, green with his father's crops, and came to the gates.

"Minghal Khan is upon us!" he cried, as he entered. Some young boys playing in the street took up the cry and ran screaming into their houses; old Ahsan, the gate-keeper—now frail and bent, but once the best rider and the cunningest horse-stealer of Shagpur—came tottering out of his hut.

"Minghal Khan, say you, Ahmed-ji? That son of a dog!" and he slammed-to the gates and barred them, muttering curses on the enemy.

By this time the cries of the children had brought the villagers into the street. They were for the most part old men and feeble; the young and able-bodied were with Rahmut Khan; but there were among them a few men in the prime of life and some boys of about Ahmed's age. Breathlessly he told them what he had seen.

"The gates are but as ghi to Minghal," cried old Ahsan. "They will not keep him out till the sun sets."

"Then we will go into the tower," said Ahmed, "and shut ourselves up there until my father returns."

He ran into his father's house and brought out the chief's two wives and three daughters, who fled swiftly to the tower upon the wall. Then with the aid of some of the people he collected what provisions he could; the women

filled their brass pots with water at the well, and carried them on their heads to the tower; men followed them with arms and ammunition, and with strong balks of wood for barricading the foot of the winding stair. Within ten minutes of Ahmed's arrival in the village all who chose had shut themselves with him in the refuge.

Not all chose. Even while these preparations were being made some of the men held aloof. Minghal Khan was a younger, wealthier, and more powerful chief than Rahmut: what was the good of holding out against him? There had been for many years a feud between them; such an attack as was now imminent might long have been foreseen. The more powerful must win: it was Fate. Had they not known many such cases? Was it not better to yield to the enemy at once and make their peace with him? Ahmed and old Ahsan hotly protested, appealed to their loyalty, reminded them of what the chief's anger would be when he came back and found that they had betrayed him. These appeals were effective with the bolder spirits, but there was still a good proportion of the villagers who foresaw that their chief's dominion was at an end, and were eager to make their own future secure by nailing the rising sun. These remained in the village street, and when, a few minutes after Ahmed and his party had shut themselves in the tower, the band of horsemen, fifty strong, with Minghal at their head, rode up to the gates and demanded admittance, one of the disaffected removed the bars and made humble obeisance as the rival chief entered.

The new-comers uttered loud shouts of exultation at the ease of their victory, not at first aware of the resolute little band in the tower. It was only when Minghal had entered the chief's house and found it deserted that he suspected what had happened. Then with a grim smile he questioned the villagers, all most obsequious to their new master; and Ahmed, watching the scene from a latticed window high up in the tower, wondered what the smile portended. He expected to see Minghal's men collect the grain-stuffs and everything else of value that the village contained, and then set fire to the houses; but old Ahsan by his side, better acquainted with the long feud which had existed between the two chiefs, stroked his beard and groaned.

"Hai! hai!" he muttered. "It has come at last. But I am too old, too old, to serve a new master. Shagpur will have another gate-keeper now, Ahmed-ji."

"What meanest thou, old man?" asked Ahmed, wondering.

"Minghal has come not for plunder, but for mastery," was the reply. "'Tis what he has meditated for a dozen years; and who can strive against Fate? When the master comes back he will find that Shagpur is no longer his. If he resists he will be slain; if he accepts his lot, he will be loaded with chains or cast out of the village, a beggar to the end of his days."

"And what of us, then?" asked Ahmed.

"Hai!" said the old man. "As for you, I speak not, Ahmed-ji; but for me, I am too old, as I said. I have my knife."

Ahmed looked into the gate-keeper's face. He read there neither fear nor despair, nothing but a calm resolution. Then he uttered a scornful laugh.

"No one can strive against Fate, truly," he said; "but who knows that Fate has given us into Minghal's hand? By the beard of the Prophet, Ahsan——"

But the old man put his hand on the boy's mouth.

"Hush, Ahmed-ji," he said, with a sort of stern tenderness; "'tis not meet, little one, that oath in your mouth. You have well-nigh forgotten, but I do not forget. We are as we were born, and you were born a Feringhi."

CHAPTER THE SECOND

The Making of a Pathan

Eight years before this raid of Minghal's on Shagpur, a small boy, dark, bright-eyed, happy-looking, was sitting on the grass at some little distance from an open tent, nursing a wooden sword, and trying to make conversation in babbling Urdu with a big, swarthy, bearded Pathan who squatted opposite him, and smiled as he tried to understand and answer the little fellow's questions. From the tent came the sound of voices, and the Pathan would now and then lift his eyes from the child and dart a keen glance towards the spot where Mr. George Barclay, deputy-commissioner of the district, was engaged in dealing with one of the troublesome cases that came before him for settlement.

For many years the dwellers in the plains of the Panjab had suffered from the encroachments of their neighbours in the hills. At first these hill-men only came to the plains in the winter-time, when their own bare lands became uninhabitable from frost and snow, and returned in the summer, when they might find sustenance for their flocks, and good hunting. But seeing the weakness of the plain-dwellers and the fertility of their soil, the hill-men had not been satisfied with paying these winter visits, and, after remaining as uninvited guests, returning to their own place without having made a domicile in the plains. They began to regard the land on which they temporarily settled as theirs, and by and by exacted tribute from the rightful owners. Thus they became possessed of two homes, one for the winter, one for the summer. Naturally this seizure of property was little to the liking of the plain-dwellers. They made some resistance and fought the oppressors, but were no match in arms for the more warlike hill-men. When, however, the Panjab was incorporated in the dominions of John Company, some of the dispossessed land-owners took advantage of the well-known respect of the British for law to make an attempt to recover their property through the agency of their new rulers; and it was to show cause why he should not yield the lands he held in the plain that Minghal Khan, one of the hill chieftains, had been summoned before the deputy-commissioner.

Minghal obeyed the summons grudgingly. In the hills he was free, and owned no master save God; it irked him that any one, least of all the sahib-log, infidels, eaters of pigs, should question his rights in the plains; for though he knew that the lands in dispute were not his by inheritance, yet might was right, and if the plain-men were not strong enough to hold them —why, so much the worse for them. And when he came down from the hills to argue the case before the British commissioner, he begged his nearest neighbour, Rahmut Khan of Shagpur, to accompany him and give him at least moral support. Rahmut did not refuse this request; but he was above all things a warrior; he had no skill in reasoning, like his more wily neighbour Minghal; and while the latter was using all his eloquence, every trick and artifice of which he was capable, to persuade Mr. Barclay that forcible possession was of more account than title-deeds, Rahmut amused himself by talking to and playing with the deputy-commissioner's little son. The boy's mother had died in Lahore some little while before, and his father kept him constantly in his company, even when his duties called him into remote parts of his district.

Rahmut, like all his race, was passionately fond of children; the fearlessness of the bright-eyed boy appealed to him, and day after day, while Minghal was waiting his turn, and when he was trying Mr. Barclay's patience inside the tent, Rahmut spent hours with the boy, giving him rides on his horse, laughing as he strutted by with a wooden sword, allowing him to fire a shot or two from his pistol. And so, by the time Minghal's case was decided Rahmut and Jim Barclay—the big, bearded Pathan warrior of near sixty years, and the English boy of eight—were fast friends.

Minghal lost his case. The deputy-commissioner decided against him, and gave judgment that he must quit the lands he had usurped. Minghal left the tent in a rage, muttering curses on the infidel dog who had rejected, quietly but firmly, all his pleas, and declaring to Rahmut that he would one day have his revenge. Rahmut was not a whit more friendly disposed to the new rulers than was Minghal himself; but he was a man of few words, and never threatened what he could not at once perform. Moreover, he had never thought much of his neighbour's case, and was not surprised at its failure. Minghal found him less sympathetic than he considered to be his due, and returned to his home in the hills in a very ill humour.

The opportunity for vengeance came sooner than he could have expected. In the spring of the next year, when a civil servant named Vans Agnew and Lieutenant Anderson of the Bombay army were escorting a new diwan or governor to the city of Multan, they were treacherously attacked, and their murder was the signal for a general uprising of the Sikh soldiery. News of the rebellion was carried through the country with wonderful speed; it came to the ears of Rahmut and Minghal, and, fretting as they were under the restraints imposed upon them by the proximity of the British, they resolved at once to make common cause with the revolted Sikhs. It happened that Mr. Barclay had lately "gone into camp" at a spot very near the place where he had given his decision against Minghal. The Pathan chiefs set off with their armed followers, rushed Mr. Barclay's almost unprotected camp, for he had as yet heard nothing of the revolt at Multan, and the deputy-commissioner, without a moment's warning, was shot through the heart. His little son would have suffered the same fate, so bitter was the tribesmen's enmity against all the Feringhis, but for Rahmut, who remembered how much he had been attracted by the boy, and saw an opportunity for which he had yearned—of providing himself with an heir. One of his wives, now dead, had borne him two sons, but both had died fighting against Ranjit Singh, and his two living wives had given him only daughters. In such cases it was common for a chief to adopt a son and make him his heir. Rahmut, now getting on in years, had envied the English sahib who was blessed with a boy so sturdy and frank and fearless. While Minghal, therefore, was wreaking his vengeance on the father, Rahmut caught up the son, set him on his saddlebow, and forbade any of his men to lay hands on him. He had resolved to take the boy back with him by and by to Shagpur, to bring him up as a Pathan, and if he proved worthy, to proclaim him his heir.

Minghal was very indignant when the old chief announced his intention. The boy, he protested, was an infidel dog: it was shame to a Pathan and a follower of the Prophet to show kindness to any of the hated race who had laid their hands on this land, claiming tribute from the free-men of the hills, deposing and setting up governors at their will. But Rahmut would not be denied. Minghal dared not cross the old warrior; for the moment he appeared to acquiesce, but in his heart he hated his neighbour chief, and resolved from that time to set himself in rivalry against him. If he could not remove the boy, he could at least bide his time, and when Rahmut's time

came to die, it should be seen whether he could not rely on racial and religious prejudice to prevent the scandal of a tribe being ruled by an infidel Feringhi.

Rahmut kept the boy with him in the Panjab through the campaign. He joined forces with the troops sent by the king of Kabul to the assistance of the Sikhs. He fought in the terrible battle of Chilianwala, and when Gough signally routed his brave enemy at Gujarat, he fled with the Afghans and Pathans to their inaccessible hills, escaped the pursuit of the Company's troops, and reached in safety his mountain home at Shagpur.

Then he carried out his intention. He called the boy Ahmed, and had him trained in the Mohammedan faith by the mullah of his village, who taught him to read the Koran (though, being in Arabic, he never understood a word of it). Ahmed wore a white turban, kept the Musalman fasts and feasts, and though he was at first very miserable, and wept often for the father he had lost, he gradually forgot his early life, and delighted his new father's heart as he grew up a straight, sturdy Pathan boy. Rahmut was wonderfully kind to him. His wives were at first jealous of the boy, and there were some in the village who never lost their first distrust and envy of him; but as years passed by, and Ahmed proved himself to be as bold and daring as he was sunny-tempered, as good at hunting and warlike exercises as he was in the ritual of religion, he became a favourite with most. The chief visited with heavy punishment some who dared to give expression to their resentment at his adoption of a Feringhi boy, and after that the ill-feeling died down, and if any remained it found an outlet only in murmurs which the envious ones were careful to keep from their chief's ears.

Ahmed was now sixteen. He was his adoptive father's constant companion at home; but the old chief, while he allowed the boy to take part in his hunting expeditions, would never permit him to share in the raids which he sometimes made on the villages of his neighbours, nor in the horse-stealing enterprises he ventured in the British lines. He seemed to be beset by a fear lest the boy should be snatched from him, and in particular he dreaded lest any contact with the British should awake dormant recollections in his mind and be the means of carrying him back to his own people. The only experience Ahmed had of contests with men had been gained in occasional attacks on caravans of merchants as they passed between Persia and

Afghanistan. But now that the boy was sixteen, Rahmut thought it was high time, he should be married in accordance with the customs of his country, and was looking about for a suitable bride. The old chief argued that when Ahmed was married there would be less likelihood of his ever wishing to leave his tribe, and he might then be given a greater freedom and take a full share in all their activities.

Though Ahmed thus had few enemies in Shagpur itself, there was one in Minghal's village of Mandan who caused Rahmut Khan some anxiety. This was his nephew Dilasah, a man near forty years old. Dilasah had expected to succeed his uncle in the chiefship, but he was an idle, ill-conditioned fellow, not without a certain fierce bravery when roused, but little inclined to bestir himself without great cause, exceedingly fond of eating, and very fat. For him Rahmut had the deepest contempt. There was a stormy scene between uncle and nephew when the Feringhi boy was brought to the village and formally adopted by the old chief; Rahmut poured out his scorn upon Dilasah, and the latter withdrew in high wrath and indignation from the village and joined himself to Minghal's folk. Rahmut was at first glad to be rid of him, but as years passed, and Minghal, by cunning wiles and stealthy diplomacy, increased his influence in the country and drew more and more men into his tribe, the chief of Shagpur foresaw that one day he might have serious trouble with his rival, and that the succession of Ahmed would be disputed. But he hoped that he would live long enough to see the boy develop into a full-grown warrior, able to hold his own by force of arms if the need should arise.

If he had guessed that his absence on the horse-stealing expedition would be taken advantage of by his enemy, he would without doubt have remained at home. But he had heard that Minghal had gone westward to intercept a caravan of cloth merchants on the road to Kabul; it was a trick of Minghal's to draw the old man out of the way; and thus it happened that the village was so poorly defended when Minghal made his attack.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

Sky-high

Old Ahsan, the gate-keeper, looked gloomily out of the lattice window and watched the proceedings of the invaders. He had spied Dilasah, his master's nephew, among them, and knew that the incident was more than an ordinary raid. Minghal's men gave no sign of any intention to collect the villagers' property—whether in goods or in animals—and afterwards burn the village; it was clear that the chief meant either to seize the place as his own, or to set his henchman Dilasah at the head of it. And that Ahsan had rightly guessed was proved when Minghal himself came to the foot of the tower and summoned all within it to descend and salaam to their new lord Dilasah.

Ahmed drew the gate-keeper back and put his head out.

"What dost thou think of us, Minghal Khan?" he cried scornfully. "Are we asses or even as camels? Know that we hold this tower for our rightful lord Rahmut, and thou had best return to thy little dwelling while there is yet time."

The Pathan's face darkened with anger.

"Thou darest mock me, Feringhi dog!" he cried. "Come down at once, or we will burn thee alive and send thee to the Pit."

But Ahmed only laughed. Talk of burning was mere foolishness, for the tower was of stone, and though they might burn the door, there was nothing else inflammable within their reach, save only the barricade which had been thrown across the winding stair, and even a Pathan's courage might shrink from attacking that in face of sturdy defenders armed with jazails on the stairs. Of this barricade, however, Minghal was as yet unaware, and his reply to Ahmed's scornful laugh was to set his men to make an assault upon the door. But they had no sooner approached it than a matchlock flashed from a narrow slit in the wall, and one of the assailants staggered back with

a bullet in his leg. Furious, Minghal shouted to the other men to do his bidding, but another shot fell among them as they crowded about the door, and since they could not see who had fired, nor had any chance of hitting if they shot back, they made haste to flee out of harm's way, and Minghal himself saw that the task he had set them was impossible. The door was of stout and massive timber, and could not be broken in without a deal of hard battering; it would be folly to lose lives in that way when his purpose might be achieved by means of a charge of gunpowder. So he called off his men and bade them search the village for powder, not having brought more with him than was contained in his men's powder-flasks.

At this Ahmed chuckled: all the powder lay in two large bags in one of the upper rooms of the tower, whither it had been conveyed at the first alarm. The men's hunt through the village was fruitless. But Ahsan sighed heavily a little later when he saw two leave the village and gallop at a hot pace in the direction of Mandan.

"Minghal has sent for powder, Ahmed-ji," he said. "Without doubt we shall all be blown up."

"No, no; they cannot get back before morning," replied Ahmed, "and every day favours us. Maybe my father will come back earlier than we suppose."

"And if he does not?"

"Why, then we must defend ourselves as long as we can. Suppose they bring powder: they cannot lay a charge against the door in the daytime, for we could fire into them and blow them up with their own stuff. And when night comes, the moon will light up the inner wall for some hours, so that they would still be in great danger. And if, when the moon goes to the other side, they contrive to place their charge and blow in the door, it will only be to find us with our jazails at the barricade, and they will never get beyond it."

Ahmed's cheerfulness inspirited the old gate-keeper and the rest of the garrison. The women and girls had been conveyed to the upper chambers, and Ahmed at the fall of night went up to them and did what he could to reassure them. Once or twice during the night, after the moon had gone down, there were sounds from below indicating that another attempt was to

be made on the door; but a shot from the window was sufficient to send the men scuttering back to the houses, and the hours from midnight to dawn passed undisturbed. The garrison snatched a little sleep, and were roused by the morning cry of the mullah in the village mosque calling to the faithful to awake: "Prayer is more than sleep!"

It was afternoon when the two men who had left the village were seen returning with three others, their horses loaded with bags, which no doubt contained gunpowder. They were received with shouts of "Wah! wah!" from their comrades as they entered the gate. Ahmed, watching them with Ahsan and others, saw them convey the powder to a lean-to beside the gate-keeper's hut against the wall. There was great cheerfulness among Minghal's men, who had idled away the day in gambling. Early in the morning Ahmed had seen three of them leave the village in the opposite direction from Mandan; and going to the top of the tower, he watched them ride for some two miles until they reached a hillock whose summit rose a little higher than the tower roof. There they dismounted and led their horses into a thin copse. They did not reappear, and Ahmed guessed that they had been sent there as an outpost to guard against any surprise from the sudden return of Rahmut Khan. It was clear that Minghal was resolved to carry through his design to the uttermost.

Confident as he was in appearance, Ahmed in reality felt no little anxiety. The quantity of powder brought into the village by Minghal's messengers was large enough not merely to blow in the door and the barricade, but even to make a breach in the tower wall. He knew very well that if the enemy once forced their way into the tower the case was hopeless; for the men he had with him were all well on in years, and with the fatalism of their race they would regard the first success of the enemy as a clear sign of Heaven's favour. It seemed to him imperative that Minghal should be by some means prevented from succeeding in any part of his purpose, and as the afternoon wore on he took counsel with Ahsan, telling him frankly of his anxieties.

"What you say is true," said the old man; "but how is it possible to do anything? They have the powder—may their graves be defiled!—and when it is dark we shall not be able to see to take aim at them as they bring it to the door."

"If we had but one friend in the village! The cowards! And they are fools as well, to desert a chief like my father for one like Minghal Khan. Were there one brave man having any wits among them, he would blow up that powder, and our trouble would be gone."

Ahsan could only sigh and wish that the chief had not gone horse-raiding.

"He is too old for such deeds. 'Tis time he rested and made ready to obey the last call. Hai! and some day, if he continues thus, he will fall into a snare —some calamity will light on him. It may be with him even as it was with Mir Ismail of Bangash."

"Why, how was it with him?"

"He had gone on just such an errand, and he was old, like our master Rahmut. He had cut a hole in the stable of the Malik he had gone to rob, and was in the very act of loosening the horse's halter when he was disturbed by a noise. Loh! he made haste to escape by the hole he himself had made, but being old and stiff, he had but got his head and shoulders out when his legs were caught from behind. Hai! hai! and then was he in desperate fear lest he should be dragged back and known by his captors, for he was a famous stealer of horses, and it would have snapped his heart-strings if they saw him and gloated over his capture. The honour of his family and people would be smirched. Wherefore he cried aloud to his son, who waited outside, bidding him cut off his head rather than let that shame fall upon him. His head being gone, they would not recognize his trunk."

"And did his son obey him?" asked Ahmed.

"He did, and so was the honour of his house saved," replied the old man.

Ahmed was silent for a minute or two; then he said—

"Ahsan, think you I could cut a hole in that shed where the powder-bags are laid?"

"Hai! How wouldest thou get there?" said the gate-keeper. "Verily not by the door; were it opened, Minghal's dogs would burst in."

"True, but could you not let me down over the wall by a rope?"

"And what then? The gates are shut: there is no entrance."

"But I know of a place on the other side of the village where there are notches in the wall, by which I might mount; and, the wall scaled, I could steal my way to the shed and maybe cut a hole and lay a train, and so fire the powder that lies there for our destruction."

"You could never get over the wall unspied," said the old man; "and if they catch you, you are dead."

"But the place where I can scale the wall will be in darkness when the moon shines on the tower. If it is to be done it must be done before the moon has crept round, for as soon as the tower door is in darkness be sure they will set about their purpose."

Ahmed was deaf to all entreaties, and about an hour before the earliest moment when the besiegers might be expected to begin their operations, he was let down by a rope from a window overlooking the wall, this side being in deep shadow. Having reached the ground, he stole along at the foot of the wall until he came to a spot some little distance away where he believed the notches to be. They had not been made intentionally, but were due to the crumbling of the clay of which the wall was made, and had not been filled up. He found them without difficulty, the outer side of the wall being at this point partially illuminated, while the inner side, in the shadow of the houses, was dark. Pausing a moment to make sure that all was quiet within, he set his bare foot in the lowest notch, and, aiding himself with his hands, heaved himself slowly up.

When his head was just below the top of the wall, he waited again, listening intently for sounds of movement or speech within the village. All was quiet in the immediate neighbourhood, though voices came faintly to his ear from the direction of the tower. He raised his head and peered over: nothing was to be seen; then with a final heave he rolled himself over the top, hung by his hands for a moment or two until his feet found a hollow to rest in, and then as quickly as might be made the descent, dropping the last six feet and alighting noiselessly on his bare soles.

A narrow lane ran between the wall and a large barn in which the villagers' grain was stored. Beyond this was the smithy, the potter's house, and one or

two more small buildings, so that he could come, with fair security, to within a few feet of the shed where the powder lay. These last few feet of space were not screened, and in crossing them his risk would be greatest. Having come to the edge of it, he passed round the corner of the building, and saw to his joy that the enemy was hid from his view by the projecting shed itself. He stole along by the wall, gained the side of the shed, and without an instant's delay set to work with a chisel he had brought with him to loosen one of the planks in the wooden side, working with all possible silence. Once the light sound of a footstep caused him to scurry back to the shadowed lane; but the disturber, whoever he was, passed in another direction, and Ahmed sped back to finish his work.

Having removed the plank, he squeezed through into the shed without much difficulty, being slim, and groping about soon laid hands on one of the powder-bags. In this he cut a hole, then laid a train of powder to the opening in the shed wall, lighted the slow match Ahsan had furnished, and, breathing hard, ran like a deer back along the lane. At first he could not find the spot where he had descended the wall, and feared lest the explosion should occur before he had regained the tower. But discovering the place at length, he swarmed up, and now in his haste ventured to drop the full height of the wall. He fell on his face, rose in an instant, and scampered back to where the rope still dangled from the window. He had but just laid hands on it when there was a deafening explosion, followed by a great outcry from the men. When he regained the top of the tower, he ran with Ahsan and others to a window whence he could look down upon the scene. The shed was in flames; and he was surprised to see two or three forms prone on the ground near it. One of the men who had been keeping watch told him that several of the enemy had come to the door of the shed, no doubt to bring out the powder, at the moment when the explosion took place, and had been hurled to the ground by the flying timbers.

Minghal and Dilasah were raging up and down among their men. They looked on helplessly while the shed burnt, Minghal crying out that there was a traitor in the village. The street and the open space in front of the tower were crowded with people who had been startled from sleep by the uproar, and Minghal in his fury sent his men among them, to slash and slay. The poor villagers fled away and hid themselves, Ahsan declaring that they

deserved no pity, because they had deserted their rightful master for the invader.

There was much rejoicing in the tower at the success of Ahmed's bold enterprise. Even the most faint-hearted now took courage. But it was clear that the enemy had no intention of departing. The failure of their scheme had made them only the more vindictive. Minghal sent some of his men for more powder; the rest, keeping well out of gunshot, squatted against the walls of the houses, ready to prevent any egress from the tower. It was plain that Minghal meant to make another attempt, and if he failed to gain entrance, to starve the defenders out.

Ahmed did not fear the first, but was greatly troubled at the prospect of a prolonged siege. In the few minutes' grace between his arrival in the village and the coming of the enemy there had not been time to convey a large supply of food and water into the tower. The water was already running short, and it was necessary to put the inmates on a scanty allowance. With great economy they might make it last for two or three days; then, unless help came, there would be no choice but to surrender, or to make an attempt to escape at night by means of the rope. Minghal as yet, clearly, had no suspicion that the powder had been fired by any one from the tower. It might be easy for the men and boys to let themselves down as Ahmed had done, but it would not be so easy for the women and girls to descend in the same way, and the least sound would bring the enemy upon them. From the top of the tower during that day Ahmed cast many an anxious glance in the direction whence his father might be expected to return; but there was no sign of him, and indeed, but for some mischance in his expedition, it was hardly likely that he would be back for several days.

In the afternoon Minghal's messengers returned with another supply of powder. As ill-luck would have it, with the fall of night a thick mist came down upon the village, obscuring the moon; and under cover of the darkness the men brought powder to the tower door and fired it. The door, massive as it was, was blown to splinters, and with yells of triumph the assailants rushed in when the smoke had cleared, confident that they were on the point of mastery. But the defenders had had ample time to prepare for them, and when, ignorant of the barricade, they began to rush up the winding stairs, Dilasah being at their head, they were met with a sharp

fusillade, which struck down several of them and sent the rest scuttling away with yells of alarm. Dilasah himself was among those who were wounded, and Ahmed from his conning post above could dimly see his rival being carried away by two of the men.

This set-back, while it eased Ahmed's position for the moment, had the effect of making the enemy still more determined. Hitherto the most part of the men had not been greatly interested in the business. The quarrel was a personal one of their chief's; for themselves they would have been satisfied with plundering the village and returning to their own place. Even though Minghal inflamed their racial and religious prejudices against Ahmed as one of the hated Feringhis, they saw little to gain by capturing or killing him. But now that they had themselves suffered, their warlike instincts and their passion for revenge were aroused; and, moreover, they were nettled by their failure, considering that they outnumbered the defenders by at least ten to one.

The night passed quietly, but evidence of their new spirit was shown next day. Ahmed, looking from his window, saw signs of great activity below, though for a time neither he nor Ahsan nor any other of his comrades understood what was afoot. By and by, however, it became clear that the enemy were busily constructing shields of wood and goat-skins with which to defend themselves against musket-shots from beyond the barricade. The work was apparently finished by midday, for the men squatted in groups on the ground, taking their dinner, and talking with great cheerfulness. But when the hours of the afternoon went by without the expected attack, Ahmed concluded that it was put off till night, and felt that this time it would be pushed home. Defended by their shields, the men could easily bring powder to the base of the barricade, and if that was blown away it was only a question of minutes. It was useless to attempt to disguise from his comrades the great danger in which they stood, especially as they were now reduced to their last pitchers of water.

Now Ahsan made a proposal.

'"Tis time for you to leave us, Ahmed-ji," he said. "Minghal, that son of a dog, is bent on seizing you. It matters little about the rest of us, but you are the apple of the master's eye, and if you are safe, 'tis of little moment what

happens to us. We shall become Minghal's men; we shall at least be saved alive. Do you, then, escape by the rope when darkness falls, and run to the hills, where you may hide until the master returns; and when you are gone, after a time we will deliver ourselves up to Minghal."

This suggestion was applauded by the other men. They had in truth little to gain by further resistance. If their lives were spared they would only pass into the service of another chief, and since Minghal's star seemed to be in the ascendant, that was a fate which all expected sooner or later to befall them. But Ahmed was very unwilling thus to throw up the sponge. Apart from his disinclination to desert his post, he knew how his father would be cut to the heart at the triumph of his rival, and felt that he himself would be for ever disgraced if this calamity should come upon the old chief during his absence. Yet he felt the impossibility of holding out much longer, and was troubled at the thought that all those with him might be killed if he did not yield.

"I will go apart and think over what you have said," he said to the man, "and I will come again and tell you my thoughts."

He went to the top of the tower, and leaning over the parapet began to ponder the difficult situation in which he found himself. And as he was sadly thinking that there was no other course than to surrender (for to run away and leave his comrades was abhorrent to him), his eye was suddenly caught by a small dark patch moving on the hillside far away towards the British frontier. The sun was behind him, the air was clear, and, gazing at what had attracted his notice, he was not long in coming to the conclusion that the dark shadow on the hill was a body of horsemen.

A great hope sprang up in his mind. It might be Rahmut returning with his men. True, it might be a band belonging to another chief, or even a troop of British horsemen, or of natives in the British pay. Keen as his eyes were, it was impossible at this distance—at least twelve miles, as he judged—to tell who the men were. But they were certainly approaching, though very slowly; they were coming from the very quarter whence his father would return, there was at least a good chance that they were friends. He ran down at once to the room where Ahsan and the rest were awaiting his return, and told them of what he had seen. They went back with him and looked

eagerly across the plain. The horsemen appeared to have halted, they were no nearer than when he had seen them last; none of his comrades was better able than he to identify them.

"Let us make a beacon here," said one of the men. "If they are our own people they will ride at once to our help; if they are not, we shall be none the worse off."

"No, no," said old Ahsan; "that would be a foolish thing to do. Minghal's men cannot have spied them yet; we at this height can see many miles further than they below. And they cannot have been seen by the outpost on the hillock yonder, for, look! the copse is between them. Let us do nothing to put our enemies on guard. And besides, say we light a beacon, and our master comes riding to our help, Minghal, seeing the fire, would know its meaning, and even though he saw not the master's troop, he would suspect, and lay an ambush, and the master might be killed."

"But how, then, can we bring them to us?" asked Ahmed. "They have halted, as you see; perhaps they have had a long day's march and are tired. Perhaps they may encamp for the night; and if they do, or even if they continue to come slowly towards us, they may arrive too late. Shall we fire shots?"

"That is no better than to light a beacon," said Ahsan. "The shots would bring them fast enough to us; but as thou knowest, Ahmed-ji, the sound of their riding would be heard while they were yet far away, and they have but to come a little nearer to be seen by the outpost. The end would be the same: Minghal would lie hid in readiness to meet them, and they would fall into his hands."

"Yet we must do something," cried Ahmed, "and before it is dark. When night comes we shall be attacked and overcome; and my father, when he hears the firing, will come up in haste, and as you say, the sound of his riding will be heard; having overcome us, Minghal would have time to prepare to meet him."

"There is one way, Ahmed-ji," said Ahsan slowly. "One of us must go down the rope and haste to meet him and give him warning of what has befallen us here. And who better than thyself? Thou art swift of foot and skilled in

the secret tracking down of prey: who more fit to undertake this errand or more likely to accomplish it?"

This was perfectly true; but the old man had another motive. There was still uncertainty whether the horsemen were friends or foes, and he wished in either case to secure the lad's safety. Ahmed did not see through the gate-keeper's design; he knew that, of the company there assembled, he would have the best chance of success; and so he agreed, as soon as dusk fell, to slip down the rope, make his way round the village, and set off towards the distant hill on which the dark patch could still be seen, stationary.

It wanted still two hours of dusk when this decision was come to. During that time Ahmed and the gate-keeper talked over the plan, and as they did so they saw the band of horsemen begin to move once more slowly towards them. They were at once alive to a danger. The horsemen were at least twelve miles from the village. At the pace at which they appeared to be riding it would take them four hours to reach the walls. But when they had covered half the distance they would come in sight of the outpost on the hillock; the alarm would be given, and they would arrive only to fall into a trap. Yet it was impossible to warn them. It would be unsafe for Ahmed to leave the tower until the approach of dark, and by that time the horsemen might have come within view from the hillock. Ahmed waited in great restlessness and anxiety, feeling his helplessness.

"'Tis in the hands of Allah," said Ahsan, trying to quiet him. "What is to be will be. But that thou hast Feringhi blood in thee, Ahmed-ji, thou wouldst not be so disturbed. We cannot hasten the dark; we cannot speak through the air to warn the master. But look what Allah can do; they have halted again."

And pointing over the parapet, he showed that the dark irregular shadow had rested a little lower down the hill, upon which lay the glow of the now setting sun.

As soon as the dusk was merging towards dark, Ahmed was let down by the rope. Ahsan had promised to hold out against any attack that Minghal might make. Then, creeping stealthily along by the foot of the wall, he continued till he came to a place where the ground was broken by a nullah, into which he leapt, and ran along its dry bottom at full speed until he arrived safely in

the hills. By this time it was quite dark; but the moon was just rising, and in a little he was able by its light to guide his steps so that he did not stumble into a ravine or trip over a salient rock.

As he came near the place where the outpost was stationed he went very cautiously. The men had taken shelter in a rude shepherd's cairn; he saw the faint glow of their charcoal fire and heard their voices as he slipped by. Then he pushed on at greater speed, choosing a course in which he would never come within sight of the men, however carefully they might keep watch. At one spot he halted and looked behind, to catch a last glimpse of the tower before he rounded the base of a hill that would hide it from view. The moon was shining full upon it, and he hoped that the enemy would defer their threatened attack, as at the first attempt, until the door was shrouded in darkness.

On and on he hastened, for mile after mile, running down the slopes where he could, wading brooks, climbing bluffs, doggedly, without rest. When he came to an eminence where he could scan a long stretch of the comparatively level ground over which the horsemen would come, he looked eagerly for some sign of them; but though the greyish soil shone white in the moonlight and the outlines of things were very clear, he failed to descry them, and could not but think that they had encamped for the night. If it was so, still greater was the necessity for speed, since at any moment the attack on the tower might be begun and the frail barricade forced or blown up.

Every now and again he paused for a moment to listen, both for sounds from the village behind him and for the hoofs of the horses. In the still air of the night the crack of musket-shots might well reach him if the assault on the tower were begun. But he heard nothing save the rustle of falling water or the cry of a jackal, and he went on again, buoyed up by a great hope that he might be in time.

At length, heated and weary, after breasting a steep knoll he espied, in a well-sheltered hollow far below him, the glow of camp fires. With the caution habitual in a hill-man he crept down warily; if he should blunder on a hostile party the chances of saving the village and warning his father would be small indeed. Taking cover from bushes and angular projections

of the hillside, he drew nearer and nearer to the camp. He had little fear of encountering a sentry, for the Pathans, in some matters highly cautious, are in others equally careless. And thus he came within earshot of the camp, and, lying flat on his face, peered down to spy if the men there were or were not his friends.

Now he was able to see the dark forms of a number of horses tethered to trees beyond the camp, and in the middle of the hollow, around the fires, the shapes of sleeping men. Still he was unable to distinguish them. He wriggled forward on all fours until he was within a spear-cast of them, and then caught sight of the red turban which his father always wore. No other man of the tribe wore a turban of that colour; but still it might be affected by one of another tribe, and Ahmed was not yet satisfied. So he crept very stealthily round the encampment until he reached the line of horses, and his heart leapt with delight when, on the very first of the line, he recognized the housings of Rahmut Khan's favourite arab. He hesitated no longer, but gave a low hail, and rising to his feet walked down towards the fires. His call, low as it was, had reached the ears of several of the men and of the chief himself. They rose, gripping their long muskets that lay beside them, and as they recognized Ahmed, they came forward to meet him, and asked him eagerly the meaning of this nocturnal visit.

It did not take him long to explain what had happened. Growling with anger, but breaking off to speak a fond word of approbation to Ahmed, the old chief called to his men to mount their horses. "Bah!" he cried, with a scornful intonation, "we will see if the eagle cannot deal with the night-hawk."

The blood of the old warrior was up; Minghal should rue the day when he conceived the folly of setting himself in rivalry to Rahmut Khan.

The chief was quick to form his plan. The first thing was to guard against any alarm among Minghal's men. It was necessary to silence the two men of the outpost. This would cause some delay, but it was of the first importance that they should neither see nor hear the advancing body, since by firing their matchlocks they could put their comrades in the village on the alert.

It was seven miles from the camp to the outpost. Rahmut durst not ride towards it with his full body of men, for the clatter of fifty horses' hoofs

could not fail to be heard. Yet the case was urgent, for very soon, perhaps even at this moment, the tower might be assaulted. Delay there must be, but to lessen it as much as possible Rahmut decided to muffle the hoofs of three of the horses with strips of blanket, and to send three of his men with Ahmed to surprise the outpost. Meanwhile he himself with the rest of his party would ride in a circular course to the southward, so that they might sweep round the dangerous point at sufficient distance to be out of earshot.

The muffling was soon done, and the three chosen men set off, Ahmed being mounted behind one of them. Following his directions, they came unerringly to within a short distance of the hillock upon which the scouts were posted. Then they dismounted, and, Ahmed leading the way, they crept round and up so as to come on the men from above. The scouts were reclining in the cairn behind the fire, still talking in low tones. There was a sudden rush, a cry, a wild scuffle, and then silence.

Their task accomplished, the four returned to their horses and galloped across the country to join the main body, whom they met at the appointed rendezvous, a copse on rising ground some three miles south of the village. From that point Rahmut had decided to make the advance on foot, so that the chances of premature discovery by the enemy should be diminished. The moon was sinking in the sky; they could not see the tower from the place where they dismounted; but the favourable moment for Minghal's intended assault had certainly now come, and Ahmed expected within a little to hear the sound of firing.

The whole party, save a few men left to guard the horses, set off at a rapid march towards the village. It was possible that as they approached it a keen look-out might descry them from the tower, but they would be invisible to any one on a lower level. True, a man perched on the wall might see them; but Minghal, having posted scouts on a hillock commanding all the surrounding country for several miles, would be little likely to take this extra precaution.

Marching rapidly, the party had come within a few hundred yards of the village wall when they heard an explosion, followed by cries and the crack of muskets. The assault had begun. The gates being shut, it was only possible to enter the village by climbing the wall, and Ahmed led the band

at the double to the spot where he had mounted when he fired the powder in the shed. Shouts and the sound of firing still came from the village; it was clear that a desperate fight was in progress; and since the din must drown all other noises, Rahmut's troops made no effort towards silence, but rushed with all speed.

The place for which Ahmed was making was on the opposite side of the village from the tower. Thus it was possible to climb the wall without attracting the attention of the enemy. Ahmed was first up; while some of the men were following him one by one he ran round to the gate on the chance that it might be left unguarded. He would then throw it open and give admittance to the rest of his party. But when he came within sight of it he found that a sentry was on guard there. He dared not risk the sound of a scuffle, so he slipped back to his friends and waited until the whole party had climbed the wall. Then, drawing his talwar, Rahmut put himself at the head of his men and led them through the streets towards the tower.

Their advance was not at first seen, for the villagers, drawn out of their houses by the sounds of fighting, had flocked to the neighbourhood of the tower, and were watching the progress of Minghal's attack. The barricade at the foot of the winding stair had been blown up, and a fierce contest was now going on. Ahsan and his comrades were making a stout resistance, buoyed up by the belief that their chief was coming to their help; but they were on the point of being overpowered when a great shout arose from the street, and Rahmut and his men burst through the ranks of the onlookers and fell upon the rear of Minghal's force. The surprise was complete. The new-comers laid about them doughtily with their terrible swords; their enemies fell into a panic, and in a few minutes the whole crowd, save those who had already fallen, were running in every direction. Many of them were cut down as they fled. Some made straight for the gate, which the men stationed there had thrown open at the first sign of what was happening. Among the fugitives was Minghal Khan. Rahmut had ordered his men to take the rival chief alive, but in the darkness it was difficult to distinguish one from many, and Minghal made good his escape with a few of his followers, and fled away into the night.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

The Return of Sherdil

To pursue the fugitives was impossible in the darkness; nor, indeed, were Rahmut's men capable of further exertions. They were worn out by two days and nights of hard riding. Before proceeding to carry out the prime object of his expedition, the old chief had turned aside to raid the village of an enemy near the frontier, and had scarcely completed his work there when he was spied by a troop of the Feringhis, who chased him with such pertinacity that he was forced to abandon his purposed quest. Having secured, therefore, those members of Minghal's band who had life in them and were not too severely wounded to escape, Rahmut ordered the gates to be again closed and the community to rest.

Before he sought his own couch, however, the old chief heard from Ahsan the full story of what had happened during his absence. Enraged as he was at Minghal's action, he was still more delighted with the part Ahmed had played. He embraced the lad fondly, called him by endearing names in the extravagant Oriental way, and declared that, after punishing Minghal, he would devote himself in earnest to the quest of a suitable bride for his heir.

In the morning he caused all the villagers to assemble in the open space before the tower, and bitterly upbraided those who had tamely submitted to the enemy. He ordered his nephew Dilasah, who had been severely wounded, to be brought out among the people, and, cursing him in the name of the Prophet, he bade all men to witness that he disowned him utterly. Then he waxed eloquent in praise of Ahmed, about whose neck he hung a chain of silver cunningly wrought, and called on the people to recognize him as their future chief. And, finally, he announced that Minghal Khan should not go unpunished. When the time was ripe his enemy should lick the dust.

When the assembly was dismissed, Rahmut called his chief men about him to discuss the means of taking vengeance on Minghal. Ahmed felt a glow of

pride at being admitted to the council. In the ordinary way he could not have expected so great an honour until he had proved himself in actual warfare and become a married man. But the old chief was so much pleased with his coolness and daring, that he was resolved to give the lad a real share in the activities of the tribe.

There was a long discussion as to the method by which reprisal might be made on Minghal Khan. It was speedily agreed that to attack his village openly was impracticable, or would at least expose them to the risk of disaster. Minghal had lost some twenty men in the fight, but it was well known that he could still put eighty or ninety good warriors in the field, whereas Rahmut had but forty or fifty. Success could only be hoped for from a stratagem. But Minghal, while inferior as a warrior to Rahmut, was more than his match in wiles. Rahmut, indeed, disdained trickery of any kind; he had won his reputation by sheer prowess and skill in generalship, and if it came to a contest in cunning, Minghal would easily bear the palm. No doubt the wily chief would expect retaliation, and would be fully prepared to meet it. No one among the council was able to suggest a likely scheme, and it broke up without having come to a decision.

Two days passed, and still no plan had suggested itself. On the third day, there rode up to the village a tall, black-bearded horseman clad in worn and tattered garments of dust colour, and carrying sword, lance and carbine. When he had come within a short distance of the gate Ahsan shouted—

"Halt, there! Who are you, and what is your business?"

"Knowst thou me not, Ahsan?" came the reply. "Dost not remember Sherdil, son of Assad? Thou didst thrash me often enough, and truly the soft part of me will never forget thy thwackings."

"Why, Sherdil, thy beard has grown since those days. I remember thee well. Come in, and say why thou ridest in garments of so strange a make."

Sherdil rode in, eyed curiously by the crowd of men and boys whom the brief conversation had drawn to the spot. He was a magnificent specimen of a Pathan, tall, handsome of feature, well made, and his horse was a match for him. Dismounting, he led his horse by the bridle and went to pay his respects to the chief.

Sherdil had left the village nearly eight years before, when he was a youth of seventeen. He had been the wildest and most unruly boy of the tribe, always in mischief, showing no respect for his elders—one day he had called a holy sayad "old scaldhead," and laughed when his father thrashed him for it. He had been incorrigibly lazy at school: not all the mullah's thwackings drove into his thick head the scraps from the Koran which formed the greater part of his lessons, and he was always very rebellious at having to fast from sunrise to sunset in Ramzan, the ninth month. But in tent-pegging and racing and sword-play he beat all boys of his age, and indeed many of the men; and when he insisted on joining them in their expeditions, which happened at the age of sixteen, he excelled them all as a highway robber and a horse-thief.

When he was seventeen he ran away, and nothing had since been heard of him. His mother grieved, for he was her firstborn; but his father, having three more sons, was not greatly distressed, for the boy had always been a trouble to him. And now he had come back, grown out of knowledge, with a fine black beard and the look of a seasoned warrior.

His father, Assad, as in duty bound, made a great feast in honour of the returned prodigal. He invited a great number of his neighbours, and regaled them with the flesh of sheep and goats and—this was a great luxury—fowls, and beautifully light chapatis baked by his wife Fatima herself, and luscious sweetmeats made of honey and ghi; but the only drink was water. And having been well fed, Sherdil related the story of his life since he had left Shagpur—a good riddance, as most of the folk thought.

It was a stirring tale, of wild doings on the borders, among men who kept the passes into the hills and lived amid inaccessible rocks, whence they swept down upon unsuspecting travellers and merchants in the plains, and even pushed their forays across the frontiers among the sahib-log. His audience uttered many an exclamation of wonderment and admiration as he recounted his exploits, and you may be sure he did not minimize them. The men about him were robbers and brigands and murderers themselves, but their deeds faded into insignificance beside the bold and desperate adventures of Sherdil. Ahmed, who was among the company, listened with all his frame thrilling. He had a faint recollection of Sherdil as a big fellow who, rough as he was, had treated him with a certain kindness, and had

shown him first how to snare a rabbit. And he felt a good deal of envy of this fine stalwart fellow who had seen and done so much.

One story of Sherdil's made the company hilarious. The chief to whom he for a time attached himself—one Dilawur, a native of Jahangia, a village on the Cabul river—heard one day that a wealthy Hindu shopkeeper was to be married. He instantly determined to profit by the bridegroom's happiness. With his men, among whom Sherdil was one, he lay in wait on the bank of the Indus at a place which the Hindu must pass on his way to the bride's house. When the expectant bridegroom came in sight, all bedizened with wristlets and chains and jewels, the brigands, armed with pistol, sword and dagger, fell upon the party, seized the luckless man, dragged him to the river bank, and thrust him into an inflated cow-hide. Then Sherdil mounted upon this monstrous bladder, and paddled it across the river. When the rest were across, the Hindu was carried away into the hills, and Dilawur's scribe —for he could not write himself—penned a letter to his sorrowing friends, informing them that their relative was well and happy, and would be restored to them fat and jolly for the little sum of two hundred rupees.

"Wah! wah!" said the company in chorus. "And what next, O lion of the hills?"

And Sherdil, whose name means "lion-hearted," chuckled and said—

"Why, did ye ever know a Hindu who would pay a price without bargaining? And the richer they are, the more they haggle. 'Two hundred rupees? No, no: we cannot afford that. The sickness fell on our goats last winter; we are very poor; our friend is very dear to us, but he will be too dear if we pay that price. We will give a hundred rupees, when we are sure our friend has lost no flesh.' But Dilawur Khan has not the patience of a camel. When he got their foolish answer he sent me with another letter, saying that if the two hundred rupees were not in his hands within seven days, he would strike off their dear relative's head and send it them as an offering of peace; only having been at the expense of feeding him with good fattening food all that time, he would require two thousand rupees as recompense."

"Wah! wah!" shouted the delighted hearers, to whose sense of justice this appealed no less than to their sense of humour; "and what was the answer?"

"Why, the answer was two hundred rupees, full tale, and a present of goats beside. And the Hindu—whom fear and the delay of his marriage had most marvellously thinned—was restored to his home, with good wishes for a long life and many sons—for our sons to pluck likewise."

And in the midst of the laughter this story evoked, one of the guests asked a question—

"But why, O Sherdil, hast thou given up the dress of thy forefathers—the chogah, and the blue trousers drawn in at the ankles, and the sandals? Why dost thou wear this strange garb, like the dust of the plain or corn of the fields in colour?"

"Eha, that is a strange story too," said Sherdil, and he drew himself up. "I am a servant of the sahib-log."

"Hai! hai!" gasped the company in astonishment. "A servant of the sahib-log! the accursed Feringhis! sayest thou, O Sherdil?"

""Tis true. My coat is the colour of corn, say you? yes, but it is the colour of the lion also. Is not my name Sherdil? A great sahib, his name Lumsden, heard of me; he knows everything; no man who does brave deeds escapes him. Having heard of my great daring in the hills, he sent one to me who had served him long and was as brave as myself, and begged me, if it were not too much trouble, to go and see him. And then he spoke fairly to me: the sahibs are just and speak true; he told me that he had learnt somewhat of my doings, and asked whether it would suit my honour to join a company of warriors like myself—Afridis and Gurkhas, Sikhs and Hazaras, Waziris and even Kafirs, many bloods but one spirit. And before I made my answer he showed me them at their sports, and verily, brothers, never did I see such skill among so many men. I saw them throw the spear at a mark, and doing nazabaze, which is, to fix a stake of a span length in the ground and take it up on the spear's point when passing at a full gallop; and, for another sport, putting an orange on the top of a bamboo three spans high, and slicing it through with the sword as they ride by at full speed. 'By my beard!' I thought, 'these are fit mates for me;' and I asked the sahib whether I might try the nazabaze myself. And he allowed me, and when I caught up the stake on my spear point he smote his hands together and said words in his tongue to Hodson Sahib that stood by him, and then he offered me good

wages to be one of his men—Guides, they call them. And I agreed, and therefore it is, my friends, that I wear this garb, which being of the colour of earth cannot be seen from afar so clearly as our own garments."

Assad, for the first time in his life proud of this son of his, swelled with gratification.

"Well did I name thee Sherdil, my son," he said. "But tell us, what dost thou do for the pay these Feringhis—curst unbelievers—give thee? Assuredly it is easy work, or thou wouldst not do it."

Sherdil laughed.

"You ask what we do, my father—we of Lumsden Sahib's Guides. We do what we are bid to do—is not that strange? It is strange to me myself, I own; for I never did what you bade me, father. But with the sahibs—well, that is a different matter. They say, Do this! and we do it, with a cheerful countenance. Canst thou see Sherdil handling a pick-axe? Say we have no water, and the sahib wishes a well to be sunk. We of the Guides do it, and I, Sherdil, am the most diligent among them. Say we need bricks to make a wall; the sahib bids us mould the clay and burn it, and lo! the bricks are made. Say the sahib desires to go a-hunting—and a mighty hunter he is, by Allah!—he bids us go into the jungle as beaters, and gives us rounds of ammunition for ourselves. And if we do well in our tasks, he gives us goats and rice, and after the feast we sing songs and make merry."

"But this is not work fit for warriors of the hills," said Assad, looking a little blank. "Dost never fight and steal?"

"To steal is forbidden," replied Sherdil; "it is against the sahibs' law. But fight!—do we not fight, my father! Didst never hear how we fought at Multan, with Fatteh Khan? And how we took the fort of Goringhar, Rasul Khan being our leader? Lo! I have many tales to tell; they will last the days of my leave. Yes, we fight, when we get the chance. Why, only four days ago we spied a troop of fifty or more hill-men away there in the hills, and we chased them for two days and nights, but they would never stand to take a shot at us, so much are we feared."

Inquiry soon discovered that Sherdil had been among the troops which had kept Rahmut Khan on the run, and loud was his laughter when he learnt that

it was his own chief whom they had been chasing. He became serious, however, when he heard of what had befallen the village during the chief's absence, and cursed Minghal Khan with the true vigour of a Pathan. And on being told that no plans had yet been formed for the punishment of the offender, he vowed by the beard of the Prophet that some way should be found before his leave was expired.

Next day he sought an interview with the chief, and had not been in conversation with him more than half-an-hour before Rahmut called his council together and asked their opinion of an enterprise Sherdil had suggested. It won their hearty admiration. One of Minghal's sources of revenue consisted of a tribute levied on traders passing to and from Central Asia. Their route lay within a few miles of his village, and, indeed, sometimes they made use of a change-house in it. They usually travelled in bodies of considerable size, and sufficiently well armed to offer a good defence against marauders. But they found it profitable to placate the principal chiefs through whose territories they passed by paying a tribute varying with the importance of the chiefs; and the chiefs on their side recognized that their interests were better served by the regular income thus derived than by forays which might or might not be successful, and which would ultimately have the effect of scaring away the trade caravans altogether.

Sherdil had suggested that advantage of this fact might be taken to practise a trick on Minghal. He proposed that a small party of Rahmut's men should be equipped as traders, and thus gain admittance to Minghal's village. Then, at night, they might find some means of seizing his tower, and while the village was in confusion Rahmut could attack it with the main body of his men.

The old chief himself, true to his character, was at first reluctant to fall in with this cunning scheme. He pointed out that Minghal's attack on his own tower had failed, and foresaw many possibilities of failure in the proposed adventure. He would have preferred to wait until he could have gathered a sufficient reinforcement to enable him to make a direct attack in force on his enemy. But Sherdil laughed away his doubts; the burden of his reasoning was that against a wily enemy like Minghal, wiles must be

employed. And as for the matter of the tower, and a possible failure there, that was not worth considering.

"Minghal had no Sherdil and no Ahmed," he said, with a magnificent gesture. "I, Sherdil, have learnt somewhat from the sahibs, and has not Ahmed the blood of sahibs in his veins? We are more than a match for Minghal, believe me."

Rahmut frowned, and threw an anxious glance at Ahmed when this reference was made to his English birth. This admiration of the sahibs was little to his liking; but he discreetly said nothing of what was passing in his mind, and the general opinion being favourable to the scheme, he gave his assent to it. Then he threw himself keenly enough into the preparations suggested by Sherdil. He declared that if the stratagem was to be attempted, it must be done thoroughly. Any carelessness would invite discovery, and discovery would mean death to those engaged in it.

Sherdil undertook the arrangements. The first step was to select the members of the pretended trading party. Five well-tried warriors were chosen from among those who had accompanied the chief on his recent expedition. Having been absent from the village during Minghal's attack, they were not likely to be recognized by his men when they entered his village. And Sherdil himself begged that Ahmed might be allowed to join the party. To this the chief at first objected. The enterprise was fraught with great danger; Minghal would like nothing better than to get the chief's heir into his hands; and Ahmed, having taken so prominent a part in the defence of the tower, would certainly be recognized. But Sherdil had conceived a great admiration for the part Ahmed had played in resisting Minghal's raid, especially for his exploit in blowing up the powder. He assured Rahmut Khan that the lad could easily be sufficiently disguised; Ahmed himself pleaded very hard to be allowed to join the expedition; and the old chief at last, bethinking himself that, if successful, it might serve as an additional bond between Ahmed and the villagers and strengthen his consideration with them, gave his consent.

"Go, my son, and God go with thee," he said, laying his hands fondly on the boy's head. "But come back to me, for I am well stricken in years, and I

would fain go to the grave happy, knowing that thou wilt be lord of Shagpur, and not Dilasah."

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

Reprisals

At sunset of the day on which Sherdil's plan was adopted, the little party of seven set off from Shagpur in the opposite direction from Minghal's village. Their goal was a small town on the frontier, many miles away, where in the bazar they might obtain the articles necessary to their proper equipment as traders. Sherdil, who had doffed his khaki uniform and assumed the native dress of his village, thought it best to start at night so as to evade any spies whom Minghal might have placed in the neighbourhood.

The journey was to have a great importance in the life of Ahmed, son of Rahmut Khan. He rode close beside Sherdil all the way, and when they halted at roadside serais for rest and refreshment, those two ate together and squatted or lay side by side. The things of which Sherdil had spoken at his father's feast had fired Ahmed's imagination. Though the impressions of his early childhood had become dim, and the people among whom he had then lived were mere shadows, he remembered that he was of English birth, and Sherdil's words had stirred within him a desire to know more about his own people. In the first days of his life at Shagpur he had sometimes thought of running away, but he soon found this to be impossible, and of late the desire had quite left him. The old chief, he knew, had saved his life on that terrible day when his real father was killed. That was a tie between them which could not easily be broken. And he had now become so thoroughly imbued with Pathan ideas and customs that he never thought of any other destiny than that of Rahmut Khan's successor. But his contact with a man who was actually in the service of the sahibs had roused within him a curiosity to see the people to whom he rightly belonged, and he plied Sherdil with questions about them.

Further, Sherdil's references to great fights in which the corps of Guides had been engaged appealed strongly to his spirit of adventure, and he pressed the man to tell him more.

"What was that fight at Multan of which you spoke?" he asked, as they took their siesta in the hot hours of the next day.

"Ah! the fight of Fatteh Khan," replied Sherdil. '"Tis a brave tale, and I will tell it thee. 'Twas seven years and more ago. We were in the trenches before Multan. Lumsden Sahib was absent; there were only three sahib officers with us. One day a kasid galloped into our camp with news that a party of the enemy's horse, some twenty strong, had driven off a herd of camels from their grazing near the camp of General Whish. Fatteh Khan was our risaldar, and he called to us to mount and follow him to punish those marauders. We galloped off, no more than seventy, the kasid going before to show the way. And lo! when we had ridden three miles, and came to the place he had spoken of, we discovered, not twenty, but the whole host of the enemy's cavalry, full twelve hundred men. They had been sent, as we learnt, to cut off a convoy of treasure which was said to be on the way to our general's camp; but they failed in this, and were now wending back to their own city.

"Did Fatteh Khan bid us halt and return? That is not Fatteh Khan. Wah! he cried to us to ride like the wind, and the enemy, seeing us, halted, not knowing what this strange thing might be. And straight through them we rode, with sword and lance, and when we had come out on the other side we wheeled about and clove through them again. Wah! they were like a flock of sheep, witless, huddling together, springing this way and that without any sense. Again we rode into them, though our arms were weary and our horses much spent. And then that great host, crying on Allah to preserve them, broke apart and fled for their lives, and we pursued them up to the very walls of their city. That is one of the deeds of Fatteh Khan with Lumsden Sahib's Guides, of whom I am not the least."

With other stories like this Sherdil beguiled the hours of rest, and Ahmed became more and more eager to do something in emulation of the Guides. Perhaps this expedition on which he was soon to be engaged would provide him with an opportunity; he vowed that if it came he would not let it slip.

Four days later the party of seven was returning. But it presented a very different appearance now. The men had changed their costume so as to appear like peaceable traders. They wore white turbans and long coats girt

about with a sash. All weapons save long talwars slung at their belts—for even traders must be prepared to make some defence of their wares—had disappeared. They had two camels, loaded with bales which might very well contain cloth. The youngest of the party, who, when he left Shagpur, was a smooth-cheeked youth with a ruddy duskiness of complexion, was now a shade or two darker in hue, and bore a thin black moustache on his upper lip.

These transformations had been effected within a day's march of Minghal's village. The party made their slow way between hill and plain, so timing themselves that they came to the gate a little before sunset. To the customary demand of the gate-keeper that they should say who they were and what their business, Sherdil replied—

"We are traders from Rawal Pindi to Cabul, but a small party, as you see, and we dare not encamp for the night in the open, lest some accursed sons of perdition fall upon us and rob us. All the world knows of Minghal Khan's benevolence to strangers, and we beg a refuge for the night, O gate-keeper."

"And what do ye offer in return for this favour?" asked the gate-keeper.

""Tis unworthy of your chief's illustriousness, we fear," said Sherdil humbly, "but such as it is we make it with grateful hearts. 'Tis indeed a quantity of cloth, of good weaving, and such as the Amir of Cabul approves; therefore, unworthy as it is, we yet hope it may find favour in the eyes of Minghal Khan."

The gate was thrown open without more ado. The traders were led to the village change-house, where they stalled the camels and their horses, Sherdil then immediately setting out with one of the men to convey the present of cloth to Minghal. When he returned, he reported with great satisfaction that the chief was residing in his tower, which was distant no more than eighty yards away. And then, with Ahmed's assistance, he unloaded from the back of one of the camels a small wooden case, which they carried carefully into the one large room of which the guest-portion of the change-house consisted. There were only two other travellers in the room—big bearded Afghans, one of whom inquired curiously what was the contents of the case which the new-comers had brought with them.

"Porcelain from Delhi," replied Sherdil at once. "Care is needed, lest it be shivered to atoms." And he laid it down in a corner near the charpoy placed for him, and covered it with a roll of cloth.

The travellers ate a simple supper, and conversed freely with the Afghans; then they all laid themselves down, and there was silence save for some few snores and the grunting of the camels, which was heard very clearly through the thin wooden wall.

Some hours later, about three o'clock in the morning, there was a slight and almost noiseless scuffle within the change-house. The two Afghans were suddenly awakened from sleep by rough hands laid upon them. The flickering oil lamp gave little light; the Afghans' sleepy eyes but half apprehended the meaning of what they saw; and their tongues suffered from a sudden impediment, for, as they opened their mouths to cry out, gags were slipped in, and fierce voices muttered in their ears a warning to be quiet and lie still, or worse would befall them. Their fellow-guests, the apparently peaceable dealers in cloth and porcelain, with wonderful dexterity and speed tied their feet and hands together, and the Afghans had not recovered from their amazement when they saw two of the merchants creeping out of the door, carrying the small case of precious porcelain between them.

Meanwhile the other members of the party, after a little fumbling among their bales of merchandise, had withdrawn from the folds of innocent cloth a musket apiece, and after the departure of their fellows stood just behind the door in the attitude of men awaiting a call. One of them peered round the door; another slightly drew aside the slats of the adjacent window—an unglazed opening in the wall—and looked eagerly across the street. There was no moon; the village was in darkness; but the forms of the two men who had gone out could be dimly seen as they crept stealthily along by the wall in the direction of the tower between them and the gate.

The two reached the foot of the tower and laid their burden down—gently, as befitted a box containing precious porcelain—at the door. Then one of them stooped lower, and appeared to thrust something into a hole near the bottom of the box. The watchman on the wall must have been half-asleep, or he would have noticed a sudden spark at the foot of the tower. It flashed but for a moment; then the two men, bending low, hastened back stealthily

by the way they had gone, came to the change-house, and slipping in by the still half-open door, closed it behind them.

They waited for perhaps a minute, and there was not a sound within the guest-chamber save the slight smothered grunting of the Afghans through their gags. Then from without there came a sudden roar; the ground trembled, the building rocked as if it would fall about their heads, and the waiting men, drawing a long breath, threw open the door and ran with great nimbleness towards the tower The street was filled with acrid fumes; here and there men were crying out, but the merchants paid no heed, but rushed through the smoke and plunged into the yawning chasm where the tower door had been. The opening was clogged with burning wood and fragments of masonry; the intruders stumbled over these, coughing up the smoke that entered their lungs, and groped their way up the narrow winding stairway.

Cries from above assailed them. At the top of the first flight of steps stood a man armed with a long spear. The stairway was so narrow that only one man could pass at a time, and the man at the head of the mounting party, coming too suddenly upon the spearman, received a thrust in the breast and toppled backward. But the man behind him slipped aside to avoid his falling body, and caught the spear before it could be withdrawn, dragging the spearman forward. Two others—they were Sherdil and Ahmed—seized the occasion to squeeze past him; but they gained the top of the flight only to see the two men who, behind him, had been content to let him bear the brunt of the attack, dash back across the narrow passage to a door on the other side. The passage was lit by a small oil lamp—a wick floating in a shallow saucer. By its light Sherdil and Ahmed saw the men fling themselves through the door into the room beyond. They sprang after them, but the door was slammed in their faces and the bolt shot.

And now great shouts floated up the stairway from below. They were cries of surprise and fear, calls for arms, mingled with the fierce war-shout of Pathan warriors. Some little while after the party of merchants had found entrance to the village, Rahmut Khan with all his fighting men had come up in the darkness and lain in hiding beyond the walls. The explosion had been the signal for an attack on the village. They had dashed forward; some had forced the gate, others had scaled the walls, and they now held the village at

their mercy, for the explosion had been so startling, and the attack so sudden, that any effective defence was out of the question.

Meanwhile, Sherdil and his band, finding themselves blocked by the bolted door, had sought for some means of breaking it down. Their chief's quarrel was with Minghal Khan, and it was Minghal Khan whom they were most eager to secure. Some minutes passed before axes could be found, then with a few shattering blows the door was broken in. Sherdil sprang into the room, followed closely by Ahmed and the rest. The birds had flown. The room was small, with one narrow window in the outer wall. A rope hung from it; the men had descended by this and made their escape. Ahmed rushed down the stairs to inform his father, and to send men out in pursuit. Sherdil hastened to the upper apartments in the hope that Minghal might not have been one of the two who had escaped. But he found no one in the tower except the women and children.

The surprise had been entirely successful save in this one matter of the escape of Minghal. The village had fallen to Rahmut almost without a blow. Indeed, save for the one man who had been speared at the head of the steps, and one who had been shot by the sentry before he himself was cut down, the victory had been bloodless. Rahmut's men patrolled the streets until dawn. Then he called the people to a meeting and reassured them as to his intentions. Without doubt they had been led away, he told them, in their attack on Shagpur, by the evil designs of their chief, Minghal. Minghal was now gone—had fled away to escape disgrace and humiliation. But his cowardice was a disgrace still greater. None but a coward would have taken flight thus, leaving his men without a leader and his family defenceless.

"Minghal has a serpent's cunning, but the heart of a hare," cried the old chief. "He is not fit for rule. He tried to take my village, and failed; and we have shown that even at tricks we can beat him. I will punish no man for Minghal's ill-doings. I myself will be your chief, and you shall be my people."

The men sent out in pursuit of Minghal returned by and by unsuccessful. In that hilly country there were many hiding-places where he might dwell. In the afternoon Rahmut returned to Shagpur, leaving one of his principal

lieutenants in charge with a score of men, and taking a like number of Minghal's men with him for safety's sake.

Sherdil received great praise for his skilful stratagem. Rahmut wished to keep him at Shagpur, offering him great inducements to remain. But Sherdil was not to be tempted. He had eaten Lumsden Sahib's salt, he said, and when his furlough was over he would return to his duties at Mardan, the head-quarters of the Guides. Perhaps later on, when his term of service had expired and he was granted a pension, he might settle in his native village; but for the present he was content to remain one of the Guides and serve the sirkar. And when, a few days later, he donned his khaki again and rode away to rejoin his comrades, no one in Shagpur was sorrier than Ahmed. Sherdil's departure had left a blank.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

In the Nets

The capture of Minghal's village gave such an accession of strength to Rahmut Khan that he was soon emboldened to plan an expedition of greater importance than any he had undertaken before. He heard that the chief of a small hill village had refused to pay the Government revenue, and that Sir John Lawrence, the Commissioner in Peshawar, would shortly dispatch a force to the village to enforce the payment. The community being a small one, it was not likely that the British force would be numerous; and Rahmut conceived the idea of laying an ambush for it on its return and running off with the revenue. He had a motive beyond that of the mere acquisition of wealth. He felt that a successful attack on a British force would greatly enhance his prestige, and strengthen his hold on the allegiance of his new clansmen.

The project was talked over in council, and the only man who ventured to oppose it was old Ahsan the gate-keeper, who, since his defence of the tower, had enjoyed a much higher consideration with the chief. Ahsan warned Rahmut against measuring his strength with the British. It was one thing to make an occasional raid on the frontier stations for the purpose of stealing horses, and quite another to attack a properly equipped force. But his warning fell on deaf ears, and no one more vehemently opposed him than the chief's nephew Dilasah, who, since recovering from the wound he had received in the attack on the village, had professed repentance and left nothing undone to win his uncle's favour. The old man, being of a frank and unsuspicious disposition, freely pardoned Dilasah for his former ill-behaviour and his dealings with Minghal, and was greatly delighted one day when the man told him that he gave up all pretensions to the chiefship and admitted Ahmed's claims. Dilasah had a certain reputation for shrewdness and bravery, and his voice, being unhesitatingly in favour of the scheme Rahmut proposed, outweighed what was regarded as the more timorous counsel of Ahsan.

The expedition having been decided on, Rahmut sent Dilasah himself to Peshawar in the disguise of a pedlar, to discover what he could of the composition of the British force and the date of its setting out. Meanwhile he was troubled by the request that Ahmed had made to be allowed to join the expedition. The boy had shown himself brave and resourceful; and Rahmut felt that if he took arms against his countrymen the last link would be removed between him and them. On the other hand, he did not fail to see that the expedition would be a dangerous one, and though he believed that he could carry it through successfully, he was anxious to keep Ahmed out of harm's way, and especially to run no risk of his falling into English hands. If Ahmed should be taken prisoner, the old chief feared lest the contact with Englishmen should awaken race feelings now dormant, and the boy be lost to him. So, after much hesitation and much pleading on the part of Ahmed, the old chief told him kindly enough that he was not to accompany him, but to be left in charge of the village during his absence.

Ahmed was deeply disappointed. Rahmut gave him no reasons for his decision; he was a wise old man; reasons could be combated and overcome. When Ahmed asked Ahsan why his father was so loath to let him try his manhood, Ahsan confessed that he did not know, which was true and yet untrue; for, though the chief had not told him, Ahsan had made a shrewd guess.

"Rahmut does not wish it ever to be said of you, 'He takes off his clothes before he reaches the water,'" said Ahsan, quoting a proverb against precipitancy. "Why fear?" he went on. "'Milk even in good time becomes curds.' He who has patience wins. It will come to you in good time to lead men and do great things."

"I hate your proverbs," said Ahmed; "they have no comfort in them. Will my father never see that I am grown up?"

"Thou wouldst not fight against thy own countrymen, Ahmed-ji?"

"Why not? Sherdil fights against his countrymen, why not I? And they are my countrymen no longer; my countrymen are here. What have I to do with these strangers who come lording it over the free people of the hills?"

"Hush, Ahmed-ji!" said the old man. "Children cry to their parents. To speak ill of the Feringhis is to speak ill of yourself. Let be, my son; what a man desires he will gain if it be God's will."

And Ahmed, being a sensible boy, did not nurse his disappointment. But perhaps the old chief would have changed his mind had he known that his refusal had only made the boy more eager to see the white men of whom Sherdil had told him so much.

Dilasah presently returned from his journey to Peshawar. His information was that the expedition was to start in a week's time, and to consist of a single troop of Sikh horsemen under the command of one sahib. He had learnt the route it was to follow; it would pass within three days' march of Shagpur. Rahmut praised him, and did not inquire how he had made these discoveries; but Ahsan put the question bluntly when the chief called his council together and told them what he had learnt.

"It was the talk of the bazar," said Dilasah, looking astonished.

"Then it cannot be true," said Ahsan. "Would the Feringhis let their purpose be known? Are there not hundreds who would carry the news to Lal Jan, the chief, and warn him, so that he had time to get away into the hills? If it was the talk of the bazar, 'tis very certain that things will be otherwise."

Dilasah appeared for a moment to be taken aback. Ahsan was certainly right, and the older members of the council showed their agreement with his reasoning. But Dilasah, after a hesitation so brief as to be scarcely noticeable, said with a disdainful smile—

"The ass does not know how to laugh. Is Ahsan the only man of knowledge and understanding? The knowing bird is not caught in the snare, and I, Dilasah, am not a fledgeling. The expedition was in truth the talk of the bazar, but I did not swallow what was said there. How should the truth be known? I sought out in Peshawar a holy fakir whom I know. He hates the infidel Feringhis, and he has means of finding out their plans, most marvellous. The talk of the bazar and the truth were as different as fire and water; and what I have told is not the bazar-talk, but the truth as I learnt it from the fakir."

"Then, if he hates the Feringhis, will he not warn Lal Jan, and so Lal Jan will fly to the hills with his treasure, and the Feringhis will get nothing, so that when our people fall upon them their bags will be empty?"

"Not so," said Dilasah, in answer to this further question of Ahsan. "He is no friend to Lal Jan; Lal Jan is, indeed, a thorn in his quilt; he will gain double delight from the spoiling, first of Lal Jan, and afterwards of the Feringhis. But why talk thus? If Ahsan, who is old and toothless, thinks himself so clever, let him go to Peshawar and learn the truth of things. As for me, I have done the chief's bidding; it is for him to command."

And with the air of one who had been deeply offended, Dilasah left the council.

After he had gone, Rahmut asked Ahsan why he threw doubt on the accuracy of the information; and when the old man confessed that he had no reason save a distrust of Dilasah, the chief was angry. Dilasah could have no object in bringing false information, for he was to accompany the chief in the proposed raid, and would suffer equally with the rest if it should fail. It was decided in the end to accept his report as accurate, and preparations for the expedition were hurried on.

A few days later, Rahmut Khan left the village at the head of eighty men—the pick of his own and of Minghal's warriors. Ahmed, left behind with a score of fighting men to defend the village, watched his father's departure with envy. How he longed that the place at the chief's right hand had been bestowed on him instead of on Dilasah! But it was useless to repine; he could only swallow his disappointment and hope that during his father's absence something might happen to give him an opportunity for active work.

Rahmut could scarcely be expected to return before a fortnight. The British force would take some time in the work assigned to it, and the chief's plan was to ambush it on its return journey, when in possession of the revenue it had been sent to collect. Ahmed went every day to the top of the tower to scan the surrounding country, but saw nothing to attract his attention. Life went on in the village from day to day as usual, the fighting men spending most of the time in playing games of chance, the workers toiling for an hour or two and idling the rest. Ahmed was of too active a disposition to remain

idle. He practised swordsmanship with one or two of the men, went hunting in the hills behind the village with some of the youths, and induced some of the best riders to join him in the game of nazabaze, in which he proved himself easily first.

And then one day, the fifteenth since his father's departure, he saw from his look-out on the tower a band of horsemen approaching. There was great excitement in the village when he told them the news; nobody had any doubt that the chief was returning successful, and all excitedly speculated on the amount of booty he had taken. Ahmed watched the approach of the horsemen as eagerly as any one. At first a mere blot on the sky, sometimes disappearing behind a copse or in a valley, the band gradually became more distinct and definite, and after two hours he was able to assure himself that it did indeed consist of his father's men.

But it seemed somewhat diminished, and when, an hour later, it had come so near that he could distinguish the individuals composing it, he suddenly caught Ahsan by the arm and cried—

"Where is my father? I do not see him; do you?"

"Your eyes are better than mine, Ahmed-ji," replied the old man. "Without doubt your father is there in the midst, and you will see him by and by."

But after a few more minutes Ahmed cried again—

"He is not there. I do not see his red turban or his white beard. I see Dilasah, but not my father."

And then, feeling no little alarm at the chief's absence, he ran down to the foot of the tower, mounted his horse, and galloped out to meet the advancing band.

"Where is my father, Dilasah?" he cried, while he was still some distance away.

"Hai! hai! he is not here," replied the man, with a gloomy look.

"But where is he? He is not dead?"

"No, truly he is not dead, praise to Allah! Not one of us is killed, Ahmed; but my honoured uncle, with some few more, is a prisoner with those pigs of English, woe is me!"

"A prisoner! Then he failed?"

"We failed, all of us. We came to the place which we had appointed for our ambush, and there we waited three days, and on the third day we saw the accursed Feringhi and his men coming down the defile towards us. Then we split up into three bands, as we had arranged, and my reverend uncle went with one band to one side, and I with my band to the other side, Rajab going with the third to the end of the defile to cut off the enemy when they should seek to escape."

"And what then?"

"Woe is me! From our post high up in the rocks we could see the chief with his band creeping on foot round on the other side of the defile, and there on a sudden men seemed to spring out of the earth; my honoured uncle had walked into a trap without doubt set for him by those accursed sons of dogs. In an instant he was surrounded, and what could he do with his few men against twice the number of Sikhs? There was no time even to fight, for the Sikhs were armed with the short guns that fire quickly, and the white-faced Feringhi called in a loud voice to the chief to yield or he would be a dead man. What could he do? And so he was made prisoner with all his band."

"And you—did you nothing to help him?"

"Nay, how could I tell that Sikhs were not coming on my side also to encompass me?"

"You ran away?"

"What could I do? If we had fired a shot we should have betrayed ourselves to the enemy, and we were not strong enough to fight them when the chief and his party were gone. And there was danger that Rajab, who was at the end of the defile behind us and had not seen what had befallen the chief, might fire and so be discovered also; and it seemed best to join him, so that our company should be stronger in case the enemy attacked us."

A youth of Pathan blood would without doubt have burst forth into shrill cursing and reviling; there would have been a fierce war of words, and by and by perhaps a knife-thrust. But Ahmed never displayed anger in the Pathan way; in this he was often a puzzle to the people of Shagpur. He said not a word now in answer to Dilasah. The lines of his face had hardened; his lips were pressed tight together; a strange look had come into his grey eyes. He rode at a quick foot-pace beside Dilasah back to the village, listening to the man's repetition of the story of the capture. He listened to it again in the village, where Dilasah told it in the street, and the people made great lamentation with cries and groans. And then, when the horsemen had dismounted and gone to their homes, he accompanied Ahsan to his little hut, and asked the old man what he thought of the things that had happened.

"Dilasah is a coward—that is sure," said Ahsan. "Did we not know it? He fled away as a lark flies at the first throw. A man fights; a dog turns tail. 'Tis an evil fate has befallen the master, and this village of Shagpur also."

"Is Dilasah's story true, think you?" asked Ahmed.

"Without doubt it is true. A lie has no legs. Did not all the men hear what he said? He would not say what is false in the hearing of them all, for they would put him to shame."

"And what will become of my father?"

"Hai! that Allah knows, Ahmed-ji. Jan Larrens is a stern man, they say, and swift to punish. The Feringhis have many ways of punishing. Sometimes they slay with a rope; sometimes they make a man pay much money; sometimes they hold him prisoner. Who can tell what they will do with the master!"

"And we cannot help him, can we, Ahsan?"

"Ahuh! 'tis impossible. Peshawar is a strong city: once and twice I have been there in my youth—before the Feringhis came. Jan Larrens is the governor now; he has many soldiers, both Feringhis and true believers who take their pay, like Sherdil, son of Assad. It would be like a man beating his head against the rocks to go there and try to release the master by force. And to buy his freedom is alike impossible. In the old days we might have sent presents to the jailer, or to the governor of the prison, or to the

governor of the city, and if the presents were rich enough the gates of the prison would open. But that is all changed since the servants of Jan Kumpani came. Strange are the ways of the Feringhis! Their eyes do not shut when one offers to put rupees in their palms; nay, I heard of a young Feringhi at Lahore, who, when Kunwar Khan spoke of giving him a great sum if he would buy Kunwar's mildewed grain for the soldiers—this young Feringhi doubled his fist and smote Kunwar in the face, and he fell backward, showing the soles of his feet. Truly the Feringhis are a strange folk."

"Well then, Ahsan, there is but one thing to do. I shall be chief now, and I will get more and more men about me until we are strong enough to make an attack on the prison and bring my father out. He has broken into their places with a few men and taken their horses; why should not I with a great company break into their prison and bring forth a man?"

Ahsan shook his head.

"You can climb the mulberry-tree, but not the thorny acacia," he said; "that is foolish talk. And you forget Dilasah."

"What of Dilasah?"

"Hai! He will make himself chief now, Ahmed-ji; and listen, let me speak in your ear. Did I not distrust Dilasah? Did I not doubt him when he spoke of the talk of the bazar?"

"What do you mean? Why do you speak in whispers? Tell me, Ahsan."

"Hush! Traitors have long ears." Then, bending forward until his lips almost touched the ears of Ahmed, he said: "Do we know that Dilasah did not make ready this trap for the master?"

Ahmed started. This suspicion had not occurred to him. But remembering Dilasah's long association with Minghal, the man of wiles, and his sudden change of attitude towards his uncle, he saw that Ahsan's suggestion might be well founded. Who stood to gain so much from Rahmut Khan's disappearance as Dilasah? He coveted the chiefship; he had been consumed with anger when Rahmut adopted Ahmed as his heir; nothing was more

likely than that he should seize such an opportunity of getting rid of the old chief, and so open the way to his ambition.

"Then it will be a fight between Dilasah and me," said the boy, setting his teeth.

"Hai! That is again foolishness," replied the old man. "What can you do, Ahmed-ji? Dilasah is a grown man, cunning as a leopard. He will speak soft words to the people, and when he tells them 'tis a choice between him and you, and you a Feringhi, think you they will respect the desires of the master when he is far away? Many love you, some are indifferent, some are envious; but when Dilasah has said his say, and made his promises, and got the mullah on his side—as he will do with presents of sheep and tobacco—think you that even those who love you will offend Allah and risk the pains of Gehenna for you? There is talk even now that the Feringhis wish to make us all Christians. Dilasah and the mullah will persuade the folk that you, if you become their chief, will turn them from the true belief. I am an old man, Ahmed-ji, but though I have a white beard and toothless gums I can yet see a cloud in the sky."

Ahmed frowned. He had not foreseen these difficulties. He repeated the Koran and said the prayers the mullah had taught him; in nothing did he fall short of the observances required of good Mohammedans. In the early days of his life in Shagpur, when he went tearfully to bed, he had repeated the little prayers learnt at his mother's knee; but in the long years since then, during which he had heard no word of English spoken around him, these English prayers had slipped from him. It was absurd to suppose that when he became chief he would try to turn the people to a religion of which he knew nothing. He could not but think that Ahsan's fears were groundless, and when next day Dilasah met him with a frank smile, and, after a word of commiseration of the unhappy fate of Rahmut Khan, addressed him with apparent cordiality as the new chief, he ran to tell Ahsan that he was quite mistaken.

There was sorrow in the village at the loss of Rahmut Khan. The people were proud of him, and with shrill cries called down maledictions on the Feringhis. But no one spoke of attempting anything on his behalf; Ahsan's views on that matter were shared by them all. Dilasah led the way in

professions of loyalty to Ahmed, much to the wonderment of the old gate-keeper. Ahsan watched him narrowly. He did not believe in his sincerity, and yet could see no object in his feigning a loyalty he did not feel. And it was not until some days had passed that a light flashed upon him. Though Dilasah agreed with the rest of the men that it was impossible to rescue the old chief, he said that it was surely desirable that an attempt should be made to discover his fate. And at that, Assad, the father of Sherdil, offered to make the journey to Peshawar to inquire.

"Who better than I?" he said. "Sherdil, my son, is a great man among the Feringhis; it is a good thing that I, his father, should visit him and see with my own eyes the greatness that has come to him. Without doubt he will be in Peshawar or some place near at hand; it will be easy for me to find him, and he will assuredly know what has become of our master. I will go to Peshawar, and bring back news of the chief, and also, I doubt not, some manifest tokens of the estimation in which my son is held."

This offer he made to Ahmed in the presence of Dilasah, and the latter strongly urged its acceptance. Accordingly, two days after the return of the luckless expedition, Assad set off disguised as a mendicant, to escape all danger of being snapped up by a hostile tribe if he went otherwise. And shrewd old Ahsan now saw through the conduct of Dilasah. The man would not feel safe until he knew for certain that Rahmut Khan was permanently out of the way. If there was the least chance of the chief's return—whether by escape, or by payment of a fine, for Dilasah was very hazy as to what his punishment would be—it behooved him to go carefully. Shagpur would never side with him against its rightful chief; and if Rahmut should come back and find that he had tried to oust Ahmed, he knew that he could expect no mercy from his kinsman. He was thus biding his time, thought Ahsan, until Rahmut's fate was known with certainty, and then he would show his hand.

"You must be ready for flight when Assad comes back," said the gate-keeper to Ahmed.

"Why should I flee?" asked the boy.

"Because if you do not it will befall you as it befell Sundar Khan. He had a rival in the succession to his father, even as you have, and Gulam, the rival,

offered to put the matter before a council of the clansmen and abide by their choice. The choice fell upon Sundar Khan, whereupon Gulam made a great feast to celebrate the happy end of the dispute, to which came Sundar Khan and many of his friends. And when the pipe of peace was passing round after the feast, Gulam slipped away secretly to the door and lighted a match, and even as he himself ran for his life, Sundar Khan and all his friends were blown up into the air. So Gulam made himself chief, and so also will Dilasah if he learns that Rahmut Khan is put out of the way."

This advice was distasteful to Ahmed, and for some days he refused to consider it. Dilasah was still very pleasant; made no assumption of authority; said once, with a mournful shake of the head, that Ahmed would soon be chief in reality, for Rahmut, being old, could not long survive imprisonment. But a day or two after he said something which recalled the story Ahsan had told, and Ahmed for the first time began to think that his life might indeed be in danger.

"'Tis to be feared we shall never see Rahmut Khan again, Ahmed-ji," said Dilasah, "and when Assad returns with the news of what has befallen him, and we have no longer hope, we must put away our sorrow and make a feast to hail thee as chief. Dost thou approve, Ahmed-ji?"

Ahmed looked at the fat, smiling face with the cunning little eyes, and in the light of what Ahsan had said saw villainy there.

"It will be well, Dilasah," he said. "We will have a feast, and Rahmut's women and my sisters shall make us sweetmeats with their own hands. That will be a great day, Dilasah."

And Dilasah smiled and rubbed his hands, and Ahmed went off to tell Ahsan. There was no longer any doubt that Rahmut's nephew meditated mischief, but Ahmed was still disinclined to take flight. He was popular with the younger men, and suggested to Ahsan that they might form a party in opposition to Dilasah and forestall him.

"Hai!" said Ahsan. "Crows home in the nests of hawks. It is vain, Ahmed-ji. I have seen Dilasah many times in converse with the mullah; he is cunning as a fox. Thou wilt be safe only by flight. My counsel to thee is to have thy

good horse Ruksh ready, and when Assad returns with the bad news—for my heart tells me it will be bad—ride out that very night."

"And whither should I ride, Ahsan? This is my home. I have nowhere to go."

"Make thyself known to the Feringhis, Ahmed-ji. Maybe thou hast kinsmen among them."

"'Tis folly, Ahsan. Who would believe me? I cannot speak the Feringhi speech, save one or two words that come back to me sometimes. I know nothing of the Feringhis' ways; I do not know the name of my true father. Dost thou remember it, old friend?"

"Nay, I have often sought for it in my mind, but it is gone. Rahmut knows it, and Minghal also, but it is clean gone from me."

"Then how could I prove to the Feringhis that I am one of them? No, I like it not; and furthermore, Rahmut lies in prison, and I begin to believe that it is even as thou sayest—that Dilasah betrayed him. Is it not my duty by some means to bring Rahmut back and deal with Dilasah as he deserves?"

"Hai! foolish talk again. Think of what I say, Ahmed-ji; the time is not long; Assad will soon be back, and then if thou art not gone, Dilasah will seek thy life and take it."

Ahmed was impressed by the warnings of Ahsan, still more when he found that the old gate-keeper's views were shared by Rahmut Khan's family. Since Minghal's raid these ladies, with their children and servants, like Ahmed himself, had remained in the tower, and the chief's usual house had been unoccupied. Dilasah had been given the house in which he had lived before his breach with his uncle years before. On the day after Ahsan had spoken so seriously, when Ahmed paid his usual visit of respect to Rahmut's principal wife, Meriem, the lady strongly urged him not to go about the village alone.

"That evil man Dilasah hates thee," she said. "Gather some of the young men who love Rahmut and thee, Ahmed-ji, and have them always about thee when thou goest into the streets."

Ahmed thought the advice worth taking, but the position irked him. The constraint was unendurable after his customary life of freedom, and he felt that it must be ended one way or another. The obvious way—the natural way to a Pathan—was to meet Dilasah with his own weapons and kill him at the first opportunity. But Dilasah's party was stronger than his own, and supposing his enemy were out of the way, the prejudice against him as one of Feringhi birth would render his position still very insecure. The death of Dilasah would probably result in a feud between his faction and Ahmed's. No one could say how such a strife would end, but certainly it would in no way help towards the restoration of Rahmut Khan to his village, the object Ahmed had most at heart. The boy concluded that he had better leave the village and go to Peshawar, to see whether some means might not be found of freeing the old chief. It was a debt he owed to the man who had saved his life and loved him so well. Ahsan might talk of the difficulties, but Ahsan was an old man; old men often saw difficulties where young men could see none. Ahsan would not have crept to the shed and blown up Minghal's powder; Ahsan would not have taken part in Sherdil's daring stratagem against Minghal's village; yet both of these hazardous enterprises had been successful. Ahsan might talk as he pleased: certainly this was what Ahmed would do.

But Ahsan, when the new plan was put to him, did not speak of the difficulties. He applauded the boy's decision, and even begged him to carry it out at once, without waiting for Assad's return. Ahmed would not consent to this. Assad's news might have some bearing on his future course of action. Besides, before he left the village he wished to know whether their suspicions of Dilasah were well founded. If they were, he would have two aims in life: to bring back Rahmut Khan, and to punish Dilasah.

It was three weeks before Assad returned. He came in one day weary and footsore, and in great depression of spirits.

"Hai! Sherdil was ever a liar," he said dolefully, when amid a circle of the chief men of the village he made his report to Ahmed. "He a great man with the sahibs, forsooth! Why, he is but a servant, and does foolishness. I found him not in Peshawar; weary as I was, I had to go two days' journey to Mardan in the north-east. And what did I see there? Two score of men standing in line beneath the walls, and a Feringhi with a boy's face calling

out strange words to them, and as he spoke these men lifted their right feet all together, and held them in the air as a goose does, and then let them fall to the ground again, and up came their left feet, all together, and so they marched, very slowly. And then they stopped, and moved their feet up and down without walking; 'twas the most foolish thing I ever saw. And then at another word from the Feringhi dog they lifted their guns—short guns for babies, not like our jazails—and held them straight before their noses, and at another word they let them down again and crossed their hands over them, and so stood without motion, as quiet and still as if they had been trees. And I called to Sherdil, and bade him come and greet his father; but he neither looked at me nor said a word, not daring to make a movement except at the bidding of the Feringhi boy. And afterwards, when the Feringhi made a hissing between his teeth—'Dissmisss!' was the word of the foolish one—Sherdil came to me and asked me with great violence why I had tried to get him punished, for it seems that if he had walked out of the line, or lifted a hand, or spoken a word save at the bidding of the Feringhi, he would have suffered grievous stripes, or have received no sheep's flesh to eat. Cursed be the dogs of Feringhis! That is what they make of the free-men of the hills."

"But what of my father?" asked Ahmed, to whom this description of European drill was not interesting.

"Thy father? Hai! He is shut up for five years."

He was interrupted by shrill cries from the men around. Ahmed, stealing a glance at Dilasah, saw his eyes flash with satisfaction.

"Yes, for five years he is to lie in the Feringhis' prison. That is the judgment of Jan Larrens. And Sherdil, my wretched son, said that it was his just deserts and the due reward of foolishness. Hai! if I had known what I know now, I would have cut off Sherdil's right hand sooner than let him go back to do goose-step and other things unworthy of a Pathan. And when I told him what I thought, he laughed at me with great laughter, and said, 'Go back, foolish one, or verily I will tell Lumsden Sahib of thee, and ere thou knowest thou wilt be doing goose-step too. Lumsden Sahib will have thee.' And I shook the dust off my feet and departed; and my heart is sore vexed,

for I thought my son was a great man, and would do me honour in my old age."

There was much shaking of heads at this exposure of Sherdil's boastfulness, and much sympathy expressed for Assad. But the man was an ignorant fellow, a dyer by trade, who had seldom left the village, and Ahmed felt sure that he had in some way been mistaken.

Assad's news about Rahmut Khan did but confirm his resolution to leave the village. He was on the point of mentioning it to Dilasah when that plausible man himself came to him, all smiles and geniality.

"Salaam, Ahmed," he said. "'Tis to be feared we shall never see our chief Rahmut Khan again. He is an old man; the prison will kill him. No man can strive against fate, and it is not meet that we sorrow overmuch for what cannot be altered. Therefore am I come to bid thee to a feast, Ahmed-ji, at which we will hail thee as chief and be merry."

"But I cannot be chief while my father lives."

"True, but what matters it? Thou wilt be chief in his absence, it is what he himself would wish; and if by Allah's mercy he does not die in the Feringhis' prison, but comes back to us, he will rejoice that we held a feast in thy honour. This feast will be to-morrow, Ahmed-ji, and I have already ordered the finest sheep to be killed."

Ahmed had no reasonable excuse for declining the invitation, and Dilasah went away well pleased.

But later in the day there came to Ahmed an old Hindu scribe who had settled in the village years before. In all considerable Pathan villages there were a few men of Hindu race—low-caste men, who plied petty trades among the Mohammedans in the hope of making money. This man had been protected once by Ahmed against the rabble of the village when he had unwittingly given them offence. He came to the tower as soon as it was dark, and being admitted to Ahmed's room, said—

"Hazur, I come to warn you. I remember the kindness wherewith you saved your servant when he was in peril of his life, and it is meet and right to show gratitude. Besides, our lord and master Rahmut Khan will reward me

when he returns, as he assuredly will do. But that is a little matter. I may be dead before that time comes, and even without a reward I would do much for you, hazur. And now what I say is this: go not to the feast to which Dilasah has bid you. I have spoken it."

"But why, Dinga Ghosh?"

"To-day," said the man, dropping his voice, "when I was sitting at my writing behind my lattice, I heard two of Dilasah's friends talking together. Without doubt they supposed me asleep, and indeed it was very hot, and I should have been asleep but for some good jin that held my eyelids. The men talked, and spoke of the morrow's feast, at which they would be guests, and one said that it would be a merry feast, and when it was ended no man would be in doubt as to who was chief of Shagpur. And both chuckled at this, and shortly after went away, and peeping through my lattice I beheld them that they were minions of Dilasah. For this reason have I come to warn you; without doubt mischief is intended."

"I thank thee, Dinga Ghosh," said Ahmed, "and be sure that my father will reward thee when he comes back."

"Salaam, hazur," said the Hindu, and went away as secretly as he had come.

Ahmed had no longer any doubt that he must go; Shagpur was no longer safe for him. He had no scruples about leaving his father's household; Dilasah would never dare to molest them, in face of public opinion. There was nothing to detain him. But, as he had told Ahsan, he would never slink out of the place furtively like a dog in fear of a whipping. No doubt if he pleased he might slip down over the wall in the night. He would not use that way, but go openly and in broad daylight through the gate.

Next morning, therefore, he told the chief's family of his resolve.

"It is wise, Ahmed-ji," said Meriem; "but we are loath to lose thee. Yet it is the part of a good son to do what may be done for his father, and we shall love thee the more if thou bringest back our lord in safety. But I fear lest Dilasah will not let thee go."

"Wah! He will be glad to be rid of me," said Ahmed.

"Not so. Does he wish our lord Rahmut to return? Will he feel safe if he live in fear that thou mayst return one day, perhaps after many years, and become in very truth lord of Shagpur? Nay, Dilasah would fain kill thee while thou art yet a boy; it will not be so easy when thou art a man."

"Nevertheless, O pearl, I will go, and Dilasah shall not stay me."

He bade farewell to the ladies and their daughters, left them, and went immediately to saddle his horse. A Pathan starting on a journey needs but little equipment; his horse, his weapons, a trifle of money, a wallet of food —with these he is ready. A few minutes after he left the women he rode boldly from the courtyard towards the gate. He was surprised to find it closed, and in charge of a new gate-keeper.

"Where is Ahsan?" he demanded sharply.

The man replied that Ahsan being sick, he had been sent to take his place. Ahmed immediately grasped the situation. This was Dilasah's first move; he meant to make sure that his invited guest and victim should not escape him. Luckily Dilasah's house was at the other side of the village; Ahmed felt that he had perhaps a few moments to spare.

"Open the gate," he said to the new gate-keeper.

The man hesitated; clearly he had his orders. Instantly Ahmed's knife flashed before his eyes. There was no escape for him, with Ahmed above him. Haltingly he moved towards the gate, trying to gain time. Perhaps Dilasah or some of his friends would arrive before Ahmed had passed through. There were men and children in the street, and Ahmed heard them calling to one another; no doubt, unless they were in the secret, they were surprised at seeing the young chief leaving the village on the very day of the feast. The news would soon fly through the place.

"Quick!" cried Ahmed to the gate-keeper, "or you are a dead man."

The man cringed, and drew the bolts. Ahmed, his knife in one hand, leant forward and with the other pulled open the massive structure, which creaked on its hinges. Seizing the opportunity, the man slipped aside and ran up the street shouting for assistance. Ahmed walked his horse quietly through the gateway. He heard cries behind him; it would take a minute or

two for horsemen to saddle up, mount, and follow, and there were few horses within fifty miles that could match his Ruksh in speed—the arab he had trained to come at his call, and to kneel down at a word. Some one might shoot at him from the wall, but he must take his chance of that; he disdained to run while he was yet in sight. He turned his horse towards a hill a quarter of a mile away, and did not set him to a trot until he had rounded the shoulder and the village was hid from him. Then he rode on for half-a-mile until he gained a spot whence the walls again came into view. Turning his head, he saw a dozen horsemen pouring through the gate. It was time to be off. With a touch upon his flank and a word in his ear the horse broke into a gallop. Even with a heavier burden than his master the arab could outpace any horse in the village, and under Ahmed's light weight he would, barring accidents, easily distance the pursuers.

Ahmed had purposely chosen a track that wound along at the base of the hills, for the undulations of the country would baffle the pursuers, who could not press on at their utmost speed for fear of a fall. Every now and then he had to pull in his horse to avoid a stumble, and his care enabled the enemy for a mile or two to keep him in sight. They could not circumvent him, for he knew every foot of the hills, and could turn off in any direction at need, with perfect confidence in his ability to elude them. They were bound to follow in his tracks. So for some time the chase continued, the distance between pursuers and pursued scarcely varying. At length Ahmed, feeling that the hills had served their turn in tiring the horses of Dilasah and his troop, swept down into the plain and gave Ruksh his head. The gallant animal flew on at a bounding pace. In half-an-hour the pursuers were hopelessly distanced. Coming to a point from which he could see a long stretch of level ground behind him, Ahmed pulled up, turned in his saddle, and narrowly scanned the course of his flight. There in the far distance were his pursuers, but riding the other way. They had given up the chase.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

Jan Larrens

It was early morning when Ahmed, riding through the level plain, among gardens which, though it was autumn, still scented the air, came to the cantonments outside the walls of Peshawar. What he saw filled him with amazement. The ground was studded with tents, amid which soldiers of all races—tall bearded Sikhs, active little Gurkhas, red-coated Englishmen—swarmed like bees in a hive. And there in the distance he sees a lady galloping, followed by a sais, and she is not veiled, as were all the women in Shagpur, save those of low caste; Ahmed had rarely seen the faces of Rahmut Khan's wives for a year or two. And here comes a carriage drawn by two horses, and in it are a lady, she too unveiled, and a Feringhi man in spotless white clothes. And as it dashes past him, the lady turns to the officer at her side and says—

"What a fine-looking young fellow! Who is he, Fred?"

"He? A Pathan from the hills, Alice, and a most accomplished brigand, you may be sure."

Ahmed hears the words, and though he does not understand them, they set him thrilling with a strange excitement. Long-forgotten scenes are coming back to him; he remembers ladies just like this one—ladies who used to speak in the same clear low tones, and men, sometimes in red coats, sometimes in white, who used to dance him up and down on their knees. His brain was in a whirl; recollection came to him like the dim remembrance of things seen in dreams. These were people of his blood—and he was a stranger among them.

He rode on dizzily, and entering the Kabul gate, found himself in a wide street, thronged with folk of every race of the borderland. The size of the place staggered him; Shagpur was a kennel compared with it. How could he find his way about this huge town? And among so many people, what place could there be for him? He knew not which way to turn, and as for seeking

an interview with the great sahib, Jan Larrens, of whom he had heard, his heart sank at the mere thought of it. The speech he heard around him was not his speech; he began to fear lest he should be unable to make the least of his wants understood. But catching sight by and by of a man in the chogah of the hill-men, he rode up to him eagerly, and asked him where he might find a serai in which to stable his horse. To his joy the man answered in his own tongue.

"You are a stranger. Whence do you come?"

"From Shagpur, in the hills."

"Hai! the village of Rahmut Khan."

"I am his son. Where is he?"

"That Allah knows. He is gone from here. The foolish one! He is even as the ass that tried to get horns and lost his ears. Why was he so foolish?"

"But tell me, where is he gone? 'Twas told us in Shagpur that the Feringhis had put him in prison for five years. Where is the prison?"

"Did I not say that Allah knows? He was taken from this prison and sent to some other. He is not my chief: why should I trouble about him? And if you have come to see him, your journey is vain. Go back to Shagpur; in five years you will see him again, if Allah wills."

"Show me a place where I may stable my horse, and then I will go and see the Feringhi Jan Larrens; perhaps he will tell me that which I wish to know."

"A stone will not become soft, nor Jan Larrens a friend. But you are a bold youth, that is certain. And that is a good horse of yours; have a care lest it be stolen. If a stranger may give counsel, I say stable him not, but keep him always with you—though to be sure you cannot ride into the room where Jan Larrens is. Wah! no matter; leave the beast with the sentry at the door; he will keep him safe."

"Then tell me where this Jan Larrens is to be found. I would see him at once."

"And there is little time to lose, for when the sun is high the Feringhis cannot be seen any more till night. Come with me; I will show the way. 'Tis without there, towards the west."

He turned the horse's head, and led the way out again by the gate, and so on for two miles until they came to the British cantonments which Ahmed had already passed. He stopped at a small and unpretentious building, at the door of which stood a red-coated sepoy. After a brief conversation with him the Pathan hitched the bridle of Ahmed's horse to a nail in the wall, and bade him go forward into the lobby. Several men were squatting on the floor, Hindus in one part, Mohammedans in another, awaiting audience with the Englishman, who devoted certain hours of the morning to personal interviews with the natives. Ahmed found a place among the Mohammedans, and squatted upon his heels to wait his turn. He felt strangely depressed and forlorn. He was the youngest among the waiting company, the most of whom ranged in age from the prime of manhood to white old age. Some talked of their affairs with their friends, others maintained silence; every now and then one would be summoned to the room beyond, and the door opened to let out one and let in another. These interviews were brief, and hardly an hour had passed when Ahmed received his call. He rose and followed the servant, quaking with nervous anticipation, and found himself in the presence of a stern-looking, bronzed and bearded man, in plain clothes of the European sort, his coat off, his shirt-sleeves tucked up to his elbows, seated at a table strewn with papers. A younger man stood beside him.

"What does this youngster want?" said John Lawrence to the other, and Ahmed again felt that strange thrill at the sound of English words. The officer, recognizing his costume, asked him in the Pashtu tongue his name and his business.

"I am Ahmed, son of Rahmut Khan of Shagpur," said the boy, "and I come to ask Jan Larrens of my father's welfare."

The officer stared a little at this plain and simple statement, not prefaced by "Hazur!" or any other title of respect.

"He's the son of that rascally freebooter we caught the other day," said the officer. "Wants to know how the old villain is. Shall I tell him?"

"Oh yes, tell him, but not where we have sent him; we don't want a gang of Pathans prowling round on the chance of breaking into the jail."

The officer then told Ahmed what he already knew—that his father was imprisoned for five years.

"I wish to see him," said Ahmed. "Tell me where he is."

"Come, my boy, this is your first meeting with an Englishman, I take it, and you don't know our ways. Your father is in prison: we cannot tell you where he is; but if your tribe behaves itself and gives us no more trouble, it is possible that his Excellency may reduce the sentence."

"I want to ask Jan Larrens to set him free. That is why I came."

The officer smiled as he translated this to Lawrence. The governor did not smile. Had it been Sir Henry Lawrence instead of Sir John, the interview might have ended differently; the former had a sympathetic manner and understood the natives; the latter was of sterner stuff.

"Tell him it's absurd," he said gruffly. "The man is well out of the way, and if his people try any more tricks, we'll serve them the same. The youngster has no claim on us; make that clear, and send him about his business."

And thus it happened that within five minutes of his entering the room Ahmed was outside again, disheartened but not abashed. The officer had spoken to him not unkindly, toning down the governor's sternness, and as he was speaking Ahmed felt a momentary impulse to blurt out that he too was English. But he was held back by the same consideration as had moved him when discussing the matter with Ahsan, and by another motive—the feeling that such a statement now would savour an appeal to charity. The Pathans are a proud race; and Ahmed had, besides the pride fostered among them, a pride that was his birthright. As he stood before his fellow-countrymen that pride surged within him; there was no humbleness or subservience in his bearing, and when he left them his unspoken thought was: "They shall know some day that I am even as they themselves, and they shall be proud to know it."

He was tingling with excitement, too; some of the words used by the Englishmen had fallen familiarly upon his ear. "Boy," "business"—these

were two of the words that woke echoes in his memory, and he glowed with the thought that, if he could spend a little time among Englishmen, he might soon recover his native speech. So it was with a light in his eyes that he stepped forth into the street again—a light that deceived his Pathan friend who had been awaiting him at the door.

"Wah! were the words of Jan Larrens words of honey, then?" he said.

"No; he would tell me nothing that I knew not already, but he will assuredly tell me more some day. And now let us go to the serai, for I would fain eat, having some few pice to pay withal. But stay, friend, canst tell me whether among all these soldiers here there are those that serve one Lumsden Sahib? I have a friend among them I should like to see."

"No, they are not here, but at Hoti-Mardan, two days' march towards the north-east. Two days, I say; but with this horse of yours you could get there in one. What is your friend's name?"

"Sherdil. Do you know him?"

"No. Well, we will go into the bazar and get food, and then I will put you in the way for Hoti-Mardan. But if you think to become one of those Guides of Lumsden Sahib yourself, 'twill be a waste of time; for there be many now waiting to put on the khaki for whom there is no room. Hai! I do not understand it; I am a swordsmith and will make swords for them, receiving a fair price, but Allah forbid I should ever give up my freedom to serve the sahibs."

He trudged beside Ahmed into the town again, chattering all the way. They had a simple meal together, Ahmed keeping a watchful eye on his horse tethered at the door; and then the swordsmith took his leave, with a sententious maxim by way of parting counsel.

"Friends are serpents: they bite. Strangers are best. May God go with you."

After resting a while, Ahmed set off on his ride to Hoti-Mardan, the head-quarters of the Guides. He had always intended to visit Sherdil, and see for himself whether his position was so ignominious as his father Assad had made out. But now, as he left the suburban gardens of Peshawar behind, and came into the wide sandy plain, over which he must ride for thirty miles or

more, other ideas came into his mind. Jan Larrens had said that he had no claim on the Government of the Panjab: that was true; but what if he should establish a claim? What if he could do something for the sahibs as a Pathan, and so not merely attain a position in which he might serve his father, but also prove his right to the name of Englishman? It was clear that he could not go back to Shagpur; he was surprised to find himself glad that he could not. New feelings were springing within him. To be chief of Shagpur seemed no very desirable thing; to win his title of Englishman, to prove himself worthy to stand among these white men, who ruled, not villages, but empires—this seemed to him a goal worth striving towards.

And how could it be accomplished? The obvious answer to the question was: Join the Guides as Sherdil had done. But there were two difficulties. His friend the swordsmith had said that there were already many candidates waiting for admission to the corps; it was very unlikely that room could be made for a new-comer, and one so young. It might be years before he could be enrolled, and he was loath to wait; the little money he had would soon be gone, and then the only course open to him would be to join some band of freebooters in the hills, for to earn his living by any menial occupation would never have entered his head. That was a matter of caste.

The second difficulty was also a matter of caste. Sherdil was the son of a man who, while not of the lowest caste, like the washermen and sweepers and musicians, was certainly not of a high caste. If all the Guides were like him, Ahmed felt that he, as the son of a chief, would demean himself by joining them. His bringing-up made him very sensitive to caste distinctions. No doubt the Englishmen he had lately left were of high caste: no doubt his own real father had been one of them; he must certainly do nothing that would make him lose caste in English eyes.

These problems occupied his mind as he rode. They dropped from his thoughts by and by when he came in sight of his destination. He saw, standing in a clearing amid jungle and scrub, a walled fort, with a tower on which a flag was flying. Beyond rose the great mountain mass of the Himalayas. Outside the walls were huts and tents of every sort and size. As he rode among them up to the gate Ahmed saw men of every border race in their different costumes; none of them was in khaki, so that these were apparently not members of Lumsden Sahib's corps. He wondered whether

they were the candidates of whom the swordsmith had spoken, and his heart sank, for they were strong, stalwart fellows of all ages, none so young as he, and looked as if they had been men of war from their youth.

Challenged at the gate, he asked for Sherdil, the son of Assad. And in a few minutes the man came swaggering to him in his khaki, not a bit like the downtrodden wretch his father had lamented. He hailed Ahmed effusively, and invited him proudly into the fort. It was, as Ahmed found, in the shape of a five-pointed star. Sherdil showed him the officers' quarters on four of the points, and the magazine and armoury on the fifth; the rude huts of the infantry tucked away under the parapets; the hornwork in which the cavalry portion of the corps had their quarters. Two British officers happened to cross the parade-ground as Sherdil was showing Ahmed round. Sherdil saluted.

"That is Lumsden Sahib," he said—"the tall one. The other is Bellew Sahib, the hakim. Hai! his powders are terrible: they bite the tongue, and make, as it were, an earthquake in one's inside."

And then he went on to describe an ailment from which he had recently suffered, and Dr. Bellew's drastic treatment. But Ahmed only half listened: he was more interested in Lumsden Sahib, the commander of this corps of Guides. He saw a tall, athletic figure, surmounted by a fine head—much handsomer than Jan Larrens, he thought, almost as handsome as Rahmut Khan. Ahmed was struck with a sudden fancy: allowing for differences of dress, Rahmut must in his young manhood have borne a striking resemblance to this Feringhi. Harry Burnett Lumsden was at this time thirty-five years of age. He had come to India at the age of seventeen, with a cadetship in the Company's service, and while still a lieutenant, at the age of twenty-five, had been ordered by Sir Henry Lawrence to raise the corps of Guides, which he had commanded ever since except for a brief period when Lieutenant Hodson held the command. His rank was now that of captain, with a brevet majority.

Sherdil was so taken up with his task of showman that he did not at once ask Ahmed's purpose in visiting him. But when he learnt what had happened at Shagpur since the capture of the chief, he cried—

"Wah! Ahmed-ji, I will get leave and go and kill that dog Dilasah. It cannot be yet, alas! for I have already had my leave for this year. But Dilasah shall die, and you shall be chief; by my beard, it shall be so."

"I do not want to be chief, Sherdil," said Ahmed; then, brought face to face with his thoughts, "I want to join the Guides—if I lose no caste by it."

"Hush! do not speak of caste. We are all high caste—we Guides."

"But you, Sherdil?"

"Hush! no one knows. Lumsden Sahib will only take men of good caste. I had to lie: lying is an honest man's wings, you know. Hai! you will lose no caste. We are all good men. But you are young, Ahmed, and there are many waiting. Those outside the walls: you saw them: they have encamped there to wait until there is room for them. And they are good men—some of the finest brigands of the hills, and sons of chiefs among them. I fear me you are too young. There are thirty waiting, and they live out there with their friends, spending their money in feeding themselves and their horses; can you do the same?"

"For a month; no more."

Sherdil drew a long face.

"A month! it is very little. Yet it may be well. Wah! it shall be well. Maybe there will be room for one or two in a month. And a month will give us time. I will teach you."

"Teach me what?"

And then Sherdil explained Lumsden's way of filling the vacancies as they occurred. He held a competition among the candidates, and took them to the rifle range to shoot it off among themselves: the best shots got the places.

"And if there are some who shoot equally well, what then?" asked Ahmed.

"Oh, then he does as Hodson Sahib did. He makes them ride unbacked horses, and the man that rides furthest before being thrown off, that is the man for the Guides."

"I can shoot, and I can ride, Sherdil," said Ahmed, with a smile. "I do not fear the tests."

"That may well be: but you are young, we have no boys in the Guides. Yet it may be possible. If we could give you a moustache and the beginnings of a beard!"

"That may not be until Allah wills."

"Nay, there is a very cunning magician in the bazar at Peshawar, who with some few touches of a stick can make the semblance of hair on the face. So we might add a few years to you till the tests are over: after that it will be as Heaven wills."

Ahmed thought over this suggestion for a minute, and then said—

"Nay, it cannot be so, Sherdil. Dost thou want me to be shamed? What if the shooting and riding be good and then it is proved that the hair is false? It would make my face fall before my countrymen."

"Thy countrymen! Hai! If thou thinkest so, better go straightway to Lumsden Sahib and say, 'I am a Feringhi, of the sahib-log like yourself. Give me clothes such as the sahibs wear, and a portion of pig to eat.'"

"Silence, son of a dog!" cried Ahmed. "I will tell all at a fitting time. And thou, Sherdil, wilt lock thy tongue and say nothing of these matters, or verily it will be a sad day for thee. Swear by the grave of thy grandmother."

Sherdil looked astonished at the sudden vigour of Ahmed's speech. He took the oath required. Then ensued a long conversation, at the end of which Ahmed rode back to Peshawar and Sherdil sought an interview with his commander.

"Well, what can I do for you?" shouted Lumsden in his breezy way as Sherdil stood before him, saluting humbly.

"If it please the heaven-born," said Sherdil, "I have a friend who wishes to put on the khaki and serve the Kumpani."

"Aha! another son of a dyer, like Sherdil, son of Assad?"

Sherdil gasped. Was his origin known after all?

"The heaven-born knows everything," he said, with a sigh. "No; this friend is of high caste and the son of a chief—a good man."

"His name?"

"Ahmed, son of Rahmut Khan."

"The villain we chased not long ago!"

"The heaven-born says; and the same villain is my own chief, and is now laid up in the sahibs' prison, and can make no more trouble; but there is trouble in the village——"

"Disputed succession, I suppose?"

"Hazur! Dilasah, a fat rascal, makes himself chief until I can slay him, and Ahmed wishes to serve the heaven-born until such time as his father is mercifully set free."

"How old is he?"

"I cannot tell that to a day, heaven-born. He seems somewhat younger than Sherdil thy servant, but he is well-grown, and can ride a horse and hit a mark. Moreover, he is exceeding skilful in the nazabaze."

"Well, well, I have put his name down. He makes the thirty-second. Is he here? Is he the boy I saw with you on the parade-ground?"

"Heaven-born, how could it be? Ahmed is in Peshawar: that boy was his cousin." Sherdil lied without a blush.

"Well, take yourself off now. I will let you know when a vacancy occurs, and then your friend must take his chance with the rest."

And next day, in the serai where he had put up in Peshawar, Ahmed learnt from Sherdil that his name stood thirty-second on the list of candidates for the Guides.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH

A Competition Wallah

Sherdil did not do things by halves. He was now as keen as Ahmed himself that the boy should become one of the Guides. During the next fortnight he devoted every spare moment to coaching him in the shooting tests. Ahmed had never shot with a carbine, but only with the heavy jazail of the tribesmen. Sherdil sought out a secluded spot among the lower hills where practising could be carried on without attracting attention, and lent Ahmed his own carbine to practise with. And since it was impossible to obtain ammunition belonging to the corps, he spent some of his saved pay in buying powder, shot, and percussion caps in Peshawar, and refilled some old cartridge cases. He drew a rough target on the face of a rock, and diligently played musketry instructor until he could declare that Ahmed was as good a shot as any of the candidates was likely to be at various ranges.

About three weeks after Ahmed's arrival, Lumsden Sahib announced one day that there was a vacancy in the cavalry. One of the men had overstopped his leave, and was summarily dismissed. It appeared later that the trooper had employed his leave in hunting down a hill-man whose father had spoken disrespectfully of his own grandmother, and until the slight was avenged the man had no other object in life.

Sherdil lost no time in conveying the news to Ahmed. There was great bustle among the candidates and their friends, and as the day appointed for the competition drew near, the camp outside the walls of the fort became monstrously swollen with relatives of the competitors and people who had come from Peshawar for the mere pleasure and excitement of the event. Among them were representatives of every race of the borderland, speaking a variety of dialects, and keen partisans of the men of their own blood among the competitors.

The men of the Guides were as much excited as the rest. The corps was divided into companies, each of which consisted of men of one race; and

though all were as loyal as any European soldiers could be, and had as high an ideal of soldierly duty and the honour of the corps, the men of one company would, on slight provocation, have flown at the throats of those of another if they met when on leave. The vacancy being for a cavalryman, the competitors were almost all exceptionally tall, strapping fellows, and the little Gurkhas among the candidates were vastly disappointed that the defaulting Guide had not been an infantryman.

On a fine October morning, with a light cold wind blowing down from the hills—herald of the winter—the competitors marched to the rifle range, accompanied by three of the English officers—Lumsden himself, Quintin Battye, the second in command, and Kennedy, commandant of the cavalry. Behind them came a rabble of spectators, laughing and yelling with excitement, and almost the whole of the corps. Arrived at the range, the competitors, twenty-five in all, were drawn up in line—Afridis and Sikhs, Hazaras and Waziris, Afghans and Pathans of different clans—and answered to their names as Lumsden Sahib called over the list. Ahmed's name came last, and as he, like the rest, answered "Hazur! I am here," he caught the eyes of all the officers fixed on him, and felt a strange nervousness under the scrutiny.

"Where is that rascal Sherdil?" cried Lumsden.

"Hazur! I am here," replied the man, saluting as he stepped out from the throng, and looking very like a dog that expected a whipping.

"What does this trick mean? This Ahmed of yours is a mere boy; you said he was a little younger than yourself. You seem to be playing up for a flogging, my man."

"Heaven-born, is it a time to be unjust? Did I not answer truly? I said I would not tell his age to a day, and the heaven-born would not have had me say he is older than I. That would have been very foolish."

"But this is a boy: his beard is not grown; we have no place for such in the corps."

"As for the beard, heaven-born, that will come. If I shave my beard and moustache—which Allah forbid!—my face will be even as Ahmed's. Shoes are tested on the feet, sahib, and a man in a fight. Behold him; his forehead

is bright, since his sword-tip is red with blood. He has slain beasts and men; did he not come with me and blow up Minghal's tower? And then, to be sure, he had a moustache and the shadow of a beard, and if the heaven-born pleases we can get the conjurer in Peshawar to furnish him very quickly with the necessary hair. And he can shoot; if I do not offend to say it, he can shoot as well as the heaven-born himself; and he is a good shikari; and as for riding a horse—wah! let Kennedy Sahib judge of that. Look at a man's deeds, heaven-born, not whether he is tall or short. The thorn which is sharp is so from its youth, and——"

"Chup!" said Lumsden, who, with the other officers, had scarcely been able to keep his countenance during this address. "You have a moist tongue. You quote your proverbs at me; I'll give you one: 'A closed mouth is better than talking nonsense.'"

"True, sahib," said Sherdil quickly, "and there is yet another: 'If you are not a good judge of beasts, choose a young one.'"

At this, and Sherdil's sententious look, as of one who says "That's a clincher," Lumsden laughed outright.

"'The child is father of the man,'" said Battye, with whom quoting was a habit. "Give the boy a trial; we'll soon see whether this man's talk is all froth."

And so Ahmed was admitted to the competition. The spectators had been growing restless and restive during the colloquy, but now that the first man took post opposite the target, and lay flat on the ground, they hushed their noise and awaited the issue breathlessly. The range was three hundred yards; the marksman was a tall, grave-looking Sikh, and as his musket flashed and the marker signalled a bull's-eye, a great shout arose from his compatriots.

"Shahbash! Bravo! That's a fine shot. Thou'lt surely win, Faiz."

And then the partisans of the other men tried to shout the Sikh's friends down.

"Bah! what is that? A bull's-eye, you say. But it was an accident; the wind carried the bullet. Allah willing, he will miss next time. Courage, Sula; look

not at the cock on his dunghill."

Similar cries, varying as the result of the shots, greeted the Sikh's succeeding attempts. Then came Sula's turn.

"Hai! Now he shoots!" cried his friends. "What is the marker about? A miss? Truly the jins are spiteful, the musket is bewitched. Do not lose heart, O Sula, the sahib will give thee another musket, and then wilt thou show thyself more than a match for that son of a pig."

And Sula, having taken another musket, fired off his six shots and retired.

The next came along, an Afghan, with features of a markedly Semitic cast, and with him a flock of his partisans. The same scene was enacted, the same yells of delight and howls of derision, the same words of flattery and of abuse—all kept within certain bounds, however, by the presence of the sahibs.

At last it came to Ahmed's turn. The colloquy between Lumsden Sahib and Sherdil had drawn particular attention to him, and the Pathans of the Guides, who outnumbered men of other races in the corps, were specially interested in the doings of this young candidate. For ten days past Sherdil had boasted of his pupil's ability, and Sherdil having a moist tongue, as Lumsden Sahib had put it, and being something of a favourite, the Pathans were prepared to open their lungs in vociferous plaudits. Ahmed fired and missed. A growl of dismay broke from the Pathans' lips; the other men, who resented the cocksureness of Sherdil and his friends, leapt about with shrieks of delight. Sherdil himself looked a little blue; and as for Ahmed, he was quivering with excitement and nervousness, as the Englishmen perceived.

"Chup! you sons of dogs!" cried Kennedy Sahib. "Let the boy have fair play. This din of cats would spoil any man's eye. Chup! The boy has five more shots."

And Ahmed, pulling himself together, took careful aim amid a breathless stillness, drew the trigger—and the marker signalled a bull's-eye.

"Shahbash! Shahbash!" cried Sherdil, pirouetting like a mad fakir, brandishing his sword, hurling abuse at the friends of the other candidates.

"Wah! did I not say he could shoot? How should he not, when I am his teacher? Of a truth, he is the man for the Guides."

When Ahmed had finished his round, he was equal with four others. Amid the din of altercation which ensued, Lumsden Sahib's voice was heard calling for order. The competitors had still to shoot at the longer ranges of five hundred and seven hundred yards. The excitement grew to fever heat as the number gradually thinned, until the choice clearly rested between Ahmed and a Rajput named Wahid. They were to have six shots at seven hundred yards to finish the match. Ahmed had now lost his first nervousness, and waited quietly with Sherdil and a group of his friends while Wahid fired his round. The spectators watched in dead silence as the man took aim. The first shot was a bull's-eye. "Wahid will win! Wahid will win!" roared a hundred throats. The second was an inner, the third an outer, and now Sherdil's party were hilarious, crying that Wahid's eye was crooked, his arm was as weak as a woman's; what was he good for, except to play the fiddle at a Hindu wedding? But their jubilation was checked when with his last three shots he scored three bull's-eyes.

"Wah! where is the Pathan now?" shouted the Rajput's partisans. "Sherdil eats greens and breathes pulao. A great sound and an empty pot. Come, let us see what the smooth-faced boy can do."

Ahmed took his place. Four times he scored a bull's-eye, and his friends fairly shrieked with delight.

"Wah! he will eat up Wahid till not a little bit is left. Let Wahid tend asses, that is all that he is good for."

The fifth shot was an inner.

"Hai!" said Sherdil. "Some low-born Rajput is breathing, and his foul breath blows the bullet away. But the next will be a bull's-eye; be ready, brothers, for Ahmed will win."

But when the marker signalled an outer the uproar became deafening. The scores of Wahid and Ahmed were equal. The partisans of each clamoured for the choice to fall on their man. Wahid was the father of two boys: therefore he was the better candidate. Ahmed was not so fat: therefore he would prove the better Guide. Wahid had stolen horses for twenty years:

who so fit to catch horse-thieves? Ahmed had blown up fifty men with gunpowder (Sherdil did not stick at trifles): where would they find a Rajput who could say the same? Thus they bellowed against one another, urging more and more ridiculous reasons on behalf of their favourites, and then Lumsden cried for silence.

"There is only one place," he said, "and these two are equal as shots. For the life of me I don't know which of them to give it to. Come along, we'll try the riding test. Fetch out that unbroken colt; jaldi karo!"

The jabbering began afresh, while a sais went off to fetch the colt. The whole company repaired to a level stretch of about three hundred yards, where the men practised the game of nazebaze. A post stood at the further end. When the colt was brought up—a mettlesome beast with arab blood in it—Lumsden ordered the course to be cleared, and the excited throng having been pressed back on either side, told Ahmed to mount and ride the animal bareback to the post and back. Ahmed sprang on to the quivering horse, which bucked and reared, making frantic efforts to throw him. But the boy had been given his first lesson in riding in just this way; Rahmut Khan had set him on horseback and bade him look after himself. So now, gripping the reins firmly and pressing his knees into the animal's flanks, at the same time speaking soothing words that he used with his own horse Ruksh, he succeeded in turning its head towards the post, and in another moment was off like the wind. The shouts of the crowd terrified the horse; it reared and plunged, and then made a dash for the centre of the yelling mob on the right, which broke apart and scattered with shrieks of alarm. But Ahmed controlled his steed before it reached the edge of the course. He turned it once more into the straight; it ran on past the post at a mad gallop, which was only checked by a hillock in front of it. Then, giving it a minute to recover, Ahmed patted it and coaxed it, wheeled round, and rode straight back to the starting-point.

Sherdil and the Guides roared with applause.

"By Jove!" said Lieutenant Battye, turning to Kennedy, "what a seat the fellow has got! Better make him your riding-master, old chap."

"Don't want one," was the answer. "All my fellows can ride. Let's see what the Rajput can do."

Wahid was about the same height as Ahmed, but broader and heavier. He leapt on to the horse's back nimbly enough, and kept his seat, as it seemed, by sheer muscular force. The horse appeared to fear him, and started for the post with a docility that surprised everybody, and sent Sherdil's hopes once more down to zero. Wahid reached the post; then, instead of galloping past, he pulled the horse up with a violent tug on the reins, and wheeled it round to return. But the animal had a temper; this treatment did not please it at all; and when it had got half-way back to the starting-point, and the crowd was already yelling that the prize was to Wahid, because he had shown the better management, suddenly the horse stopped dead, planting his fore feet firmly in the sand; up flew its hind hoofs, and the Rajput went clean over its head, falling with a thwack just in front of its nose.

The roar that went up from the crowd might almost have been heard at Peshawar. The Guides to a man shouted Ahmed's name; the Pathans among the spectators danced a kind of war-dance, and some, losing their heads, fired off their jazails with imminent risk of blowing some one to pieces. Sherdil, after a glance at his commander's face, in which he read the verdict, called to a comrade, and Ahmed was hoisted on to their shoulders and carried in triumph back to the fort.

"Wah! Did I not say it?" cried Sherdil. "What a man seeketh happens to him. I said 'I, Sherdil, will teach thee, Ahmed, the right way and make thee a Guide.' And now we will have a tamasha. Lumsden Sahib will give us a sheep or a goat, and we will be very merry."

Thus Ahmed became a trooper of the Guides.

CHAPTER THE NINTH

A Fakir

Ahmed had enlisted in the Guides with two very definite purposes—the one closely connected with the other. The first was, to achieve something that would establish a claim on the sahibs; the second, to effect the release of Rahmut Khan, or at least to shorten his imprisonment. Since the possibility of the second depended on the first, he bent his whole energies, from the moment he donned the khaki, to the mastery of his duties. The circumstances of his admission to the corps were such that many eyes were watching him. Some of the men were curious; others, Sherdil's friends, were jealous that he should justify them; the British officers were interested, not merely in observing the result of the experiment of enlisting one much below the average age, but in the boy himself. There was in him a nameless something that attracted them, and all of them, from Lumsden downwards, kept a special eye upon his progress.

He showed himself quick at drill, and at exercise with the sword and lance. Assad had reported quite accurately about the goose-step; but Ahmed, so far from feeling any indignity in standing on one foot, found it amusing to watch the lines of men lifting and setting down their feet like automata at the word of the officers, and gravely balancing themselves like herons at a pond. He had nothing to learn in "stables" save some small matters of routine, and in three months passed as a thoroughly efficient sowar. Furthermore, he was on good terms with his comrades. Sherdil treated him as a show pupil, and one day took an opportunity of asking Lumsden Sahib whether his praise of Ahmed had not been well deserved.

"Do you want us to make him a risaldar at once?" said Lumsden, with a laugh.

"The heaven-born knows that I, Sherdil, am not yet a naik," said the man readily. Lumsden owed a great part of his influence with the men to the freedom he permitted in his intercourse with them. His attitude towards

them was that of one brave man to another; it made for mutual respect; yet no man forgot that the commander was a hazur or presumed on his *bonhomie*.

Ahmed was one of the escort that accompanied Lumsden and Sir John Lawrence to their interview with Dost Muhammed, the Amir of Kabul, at the entrance to the Khaibar Pass on the first day of the New Year. He wondered whether Jan Larrens would recognize him, but the great man was too preoccupied to notice a trooper. When it became known that in pursuance of the agreement made at that meeting Lumsden was to go before long on a mission to Kandahar, Ahmed hoped that he would be chosen among the escort on that occasion. Proximity day after day to the British officers would provide him with many opportunities of picking up their language. But before the time came for the mission to start he had reason to change his mind.

One evening, as he was passing alone through the Pathan lines of the infantry, he heard through the kusskuss matting which formed the doorway of one of the huts, and which had been blown aside for a second by a gust of wind, a voice that sounded strangely familiar. It was not the voice of any of his comrades, and for a moment he could not remember to whom it belonged. Not greatly concerned, he was passing on when he recalled it in a flash; it was certainly very much like the voice of Minghal, ex-chief of Mandan, and his father's enemy. He paused; if the speaker was indeed Minghal, what had brought him to Hoti-Mardan? Ahmed wondered whether the defeated chief had heard of his enlistment in the Guides, and had come on his own or Dilasah's behalf to do him a mischief. It occurred to him that he might be mistaken; but it was as well to make sure.

The hut was one of a row, beneath the parapet of the wall, built of mud, and eight or ten feet apart. At first Ahmed thought of creeping up to the doorway and pushing aside the matting gently so as to get a view of the occupants. There was some risk in this, however; he might be seen by those inside the hut, or by some one passing outside, and then his purpose would be defeated. So he crept round to the back, trying to find a crack in the wall of the flimsily-built hut, such as were often caused by the shrinking of the mud under the sun's heat. But in this he was disappointed. The hut, being close against the wall of the fort, had been defended from the sun's rays.

Nothing daunted, he proceeded with his knife to cut a hole, very gently, as his tribesmen were wont to do when stealing horses. He was so dexterous in this that he soon scratched away the dried mud until he had made a hole a little larger than his eye. Then, as he expected, he came upon the straw network with which the mud was held together. So far his movements had been almost soundless, but there was a considerable risk of being heard if he cut the straw which alone stood between him and the occupants of the hut. Every now and then a gust of wind came, whistling as it swept between the hut and the wall. Taking advantage of this slight noise, he inserted the point of his knife and gently severed the straw until he was able to see pretty clearly the interior of the hut, lit as it was by a small saucer-lamp.

The occupants appeared to be three in number. Two of them were Panjabis, whom, being infantrymen, he knew but slightly. In the third he did not recognize, as he expected to do, the figure of Minghal Khan. It was a fakir, with long matted grey hair and a straggling beard. Cold as the weather was, the fakir was almost entirely unclothed; his body was smeared with ashes.

And then Ahmed blessed the caution which had prevented him from creeping up to the doorway of matting in front. Just behind it, so much in shadow that Ahmed had not at first perceived him, stood a fourth man, who peeped through now and again, as if to see that nobody approached without warning. At the same time he lent an ear to the conversation going on among his comrades, who were seated, cross-legged, on the floor. There was something suspicious in the attitude of the man on guard. Ahmed had once or twice lately noticed a certain restlessness among some of the Musalman members of the corps. He felt quite sure that the men were after no good, and removing his eye from the aperture, he turned his ear towards it The meeting was evidently a secret one, and it seemed to him important to know what was going on. The strange resemblance of the voice of one of the men to that of his enemy Minghal still disturbed him, and, as was perhaps natural in the circumstances, he still had a suspicion that he was himself the subject of their discussion; but as he listened, he soon found that they were talking about matters far more weighty than the latest recruit of the Guides.

"The Feringhis are attacking our religion," were the first words he heard. "Is it not a time when all good Musalmans should lay aside their little personal

quarrels and join hands against the common foe?"

It was evidently the fakir who was speaking, and Ahmed was again struck by the likeness of his voice to Minghal's.

"The time is at hand when all the Feringhis shall be smitten," the voice continued. "Why have the infidels enlisted so many followers of Islam in their army? Why are they making this new cartridge? To turn the sons of the Prophet from the true faith."

"Bah!" said one of the group. "The Feringhis' religion has nought to do with the eating of pigs. They are men of the Book. They eat pigs, it is true; but that concerns not their religion."

"Foolish one, dost thou not see? This cartridge is smeared with the fat of pigs, and when a true believer bites off the top, as the need is, does he not lose his caste and become a pariah? Will his father speak to him? Will his brother eat with him? Nay, he loses father, brother, all his kin; and then the Feringhi comes and says, 'Dog, thou art outcast. Embrace my religion, or thou art friendless in this world as well as damned in the next.'"

"That may be so, O holy one," said the second man; "but what does it concern us? We have not the new cartridge of which you speak. Our sahibs are honourable; they would do nothing in despite of our religion; Lumsden Sahib told me when I became a Guide that he would not permit any man to interfere with that."

"Hai! Remember the saying, 'What is the goat, what is its flavour?' The goat can never become a camel, nor can its milk ever taste like the buffalo's. Your sahibs are kafirs; they hold not the faith; they but bide the time, and then assuredly you will be defiled."

"But didst thou not say that nothing can be done without the help of the accursed Hindus? I for one will not join hands with the dogs."

"Nay, nay, in this matter Islam and Shiva are at one. The Hindu by tasting the fat of the sacred cow, the Musalman by tasting the fat of the loathed swine, become alike defiled. The Feringhis are powerful. They are in the saddle. If the Hindus will aid us in tearing them out of the saddle, shall we despise their help? Have you not a saying, 'Buffalo! though we are not of

one mountain, we belong to one thicket'? We Musalmans have our horns in the thicket; shall not Hindus help to disentangle them? When the Feringhis are smitten and sent to perdition, then will be the time for us true believers to deal fitly with the Hindu dogs. Will it not be then as it was in the days of the great Shah Nadir? Once more the Afghans, men of your race and faithful sons of the Prophet, will pour into the plains and set up a new and glorious kingdom. Who reigns now in Delhi? Bahadur Shah, toothless, feeble-kneed, a puppet in the hands of the Feringhis, doing nought from sunrise to sunset but invent foolish verses. We will change that; we will restore him to his dignities, or set up another in his room. As in the old days, every soldier in our host shall become a zamindar. There will be no goose-step to learn; no useless drill; none of the humiliation of obeying the commands of the white-faced dogs."

Though the fakir spoke in low tones, there was an intensity in his utterance that had its effect upon the listeners. This news of the fat-smeared cartridge troubled them in spite of themselves. They had heard nothing of it before; as a matter of fact, it had not yet been issued from the factory at Dam-dam; and but for the insolence of a Lascar, probably no suspicion of it would have arisen. The Lascar asked a Hindu one day for a drink of water from his brass lotah, which the Hindu indignantly refused, since he could not himself use the vessel again without losing caste. Upon this the Lascar retorted that he would soon have no caste to lose, since he would have to bite a cartridge smeared with the fat of pigs and cows. The news spread like wild-fire through the native army; and the terrible fear that the introduction of the new cartridge was a cunning device to make them pariahs, acting on superstitious minds which had other causes of disaffection, wrought the sepoys to a dangerous state of unrest.

But the fakir, besides appealing to his hearers' religious feelings, appealed also to their cupidity. He knew his men well. Like many of the Guides, they were by nature and training robbers. The prospect of unlimited plunder fired their imagination, and they received his last speech with a grunt of approval. He was quick to seize his advantage.

"Listen, brothers," he said in a mysterious whisper which Ahmed could barely catch. '"Tis nigh a hundred years since the Feringhi Clive, that son of perdition, defeated the host of Siraj-uddaula at Plassey. A holy man foretold

that when the evil dominion of the Feringhis had endured for a hundred years, it should fade and vanish as a dream. The time is at hand, my brothers. Have I not lately received the sign from the hands of the Maulavi himself, the saint who now goes to and fro to stir the hearts of the faithful? Behold!"

Ahmed turned his eye quickly to the hole, and saw the fakir produce from his loin-cloth a chapati—a flat cake of unleavened bread—which he handed with a solemn gesture to one of the Guides. The man took it as though it were a sacred object.

"That is the sign chosen by the holy Maulavi Ahmed Ullah of Faizabad. Pass it to your comrades, brother, such of them as are true. I myself may no longer stay: I have far to go. Work in silence and discreetly, but with no loss of time. The hour is at hand; no man knoweth when the Maulavi may give the word. The train is laid from Meerut to Calcutta. The prize—wealth in this world and bliss in the world to come—is for him who leads, not for him who follows, in the blessed work. I will record your names, so that the Maulavi may have you in remembrance."

Ahmed had been so intently watching, that, being unable to hear and see at the same time, he lost part of this address. When he put his ear again to the hole, he could not catch the whispered words. With his knife he slightly enlarged the opening, and was straining his ears when he heard a light footfall behind him. Before he could turn, an arm was flung round his neck, a hand was pressed over his mouth, and in spite of his struggles to free himself he was held there until his captor, joined by others, securely gagged and trussed him. The man nearest him in the hut had heard the scratching of his knife, and crept out; his companions had followed him; and Ahmed was a prisoner.

While one of the men was scouting to make sure that nobody approached, the others dragged their captive round the hut and in at the doorway. As he entered, the fakir rose to his feet, and a glare of triumph lit his eyes.

"A spy!" he cried in a whisper. "Allah protects the faithful."

"Shall it be a knife, holy one?" asked one of the men.

"Nay, nay," said another, "a knife means blood on the floor. And how could we carry him from the lines? Within a little the gun will signal for 'lights out,' and the gates will be closed. We could not carry a dead man without being seen by the sentry. 'Tis easier to carry a man alive than dead."

"But we cannot keep him here," said the third. "'Tis Ahmed, the child who puts his elders to shame at man's work, and licks the boots of the sahibs. Search will be made for him; the braggart Sherdil, who shares his hut, will raise a cry when he is missed. This is evil work: he will betray us."

"Listen to me," said the fakir. "When the gun fires I go. But I will remain without, at the foot of the wall. When the night is far spent, do you lift him and throw him over the wall. Then will I take him and cast him into the river, and none will know."

"But the sentry!" said one of the men.

"Bah! has he eyes all round? The night is dark; none will see. Brothers, he is a kafir; he is a Feringhi who has come among you to learn your secrets and betray you. He shall die. So may all perish that stand in the way of the faithful."

And then Ahmed knew that the fakir was in very truth his enemy, Minghal. The voice, the glance of hate, the knowledge that he was an Englishman—all proved that his first suspicion was just. At the fakir's words one of the men spat upon him; then he was cast to the floor behind a charpoy that lay on one side of the entrance. Another charpoy was on the opposite side. It was near this that the conspirators had been squatting. The charpoy behind which he had been flung concealed him from the view of any one who should enter the doorway, and one of the men now placed the little lamp on the floor near the end of the charpoy, so that a shadow was cast on the place where Ahmed lay.

His hands and feet being tied, and his mouth gagged, the men felt free to listen to the fakir as he told them their prisoner's history. Ahmed felt that that history would soon come to an end. Even if a friend should enter the hut, he was so well concealed that he might escape observation. He had no means of giving an alarm; he saw no way of escape: and when the lights were out and the fort was in darkness, it would be no difficult matter for the

men to do as the fakir had suggested. And should the sound of his fall from the wall attract the notice of a sentry, and bring any one to the spot, he knew that Minghal would certainly dispatch him even though he should himself be seized. A knife-thrust would take but the fraction of a second; and Minghal was such an adept in cunning that he might make good his escape.

And so he lay helpless while his captors planned how they would lower him over the wall by a rope, so that no sound of falling should catch the sentry's ear. They agreed that they ran a risk; but there was greater risk in any other course. To dispose of him was imperative, or they themselves were doomed. The safest time would be two hours after "lights out," when the sentries had been changed; it would not be many minutes before the signal gun was fired.

Ahmed tried again and again to think of some way of escaping the impending doom. If only he could attract the attention of some of his friends in the corps, all might be well. He longed that Sherdil, or Dilawur, or Rasul, all good friends of his, might be brought by some lucky chance into the hut. There was a possibility that he might then raise himself above the charpoy and be seen. With all his heart he hoped that the men would not extinguish the lamp before the signal was given, and he felt that if no help should come while it still burned he was lost indeed.

With the thought of the imminent extinction of the light a wild chance suggested itself. On the charpoy, close to his feet, was a small bundle of straw which had apparently been used as a pillow. It was almost opposite to the lamp. Drawing up his feet slightly, he gently pushed the bundle to the edge of the charpoy. He was careful to move it slowly, for straw crackles, and he expected that the slight rustle he could not help making would be heard by the men. But if they heard the sound at all, they probably attributed it merely to his uneasy movements. He pushed the bundle inch by inch until it came to a position where in a few moments it must fall over the edge of the charpoy to the floor. Would it fall on the lamp? If it did, would it extinguish the flame? If it did not extinguish the flame, would it catch light quickly enough to prevent the men from quenching the flame? To all these questions was added another: Would the signal gun be fired before anything could be done?

Ahmed saw that the men were so near to the lamp that even if the bundle caught fire they could stamp out the flames before they made such a glare as would raise an alarm. By some means this must be prevented. The very signal he had dreaded lent him aid. The gun was fired. The fakir rose to go. In another moment the lamp would be put out. Ahmed gave the little bundle the last tilt necessary to cause it to overbalance, and next instant he drew his feet up, stuck them under the charpoy, and, suddenly shooting them out, kicked it directly upon the three men, who were still squatting on the floor, looking towards the fakir as they bade him farewell. The three or four seconds thus gained achieved his object. The straw was ignited, a huge flame shot up in an instant to the roof. This, as in all Indian huts, was low. Being made of thatch it caught fire readily. The hut was ablaze.

For the moment the conspirators were thrown so completely off their balance that they knew not how to act. But it soon dawned on them that the fire must bring the whole camp down on them; already there were cries from without. The discovery of Ahmed bound, dead or alive, would be fatal to them. They could not get rid of him. Safety lay in flight alone. Barely five seconds after the sudden outbreak of flame they dashed out of the hut, rushed among the men who were flocking up, and in the confusion made for the gate and disappeared.

But the fakir was not with them. On the point of departing when the straw caught fire, he too had been dazed for a moment by the sudden glare, and took a step forward to flee. But then he turned, whipped out his knife, and ran to where Ahmed lay. Ahmed saw him coming, saw the knife in his hand, knew his fell purpose. Quick as thought he wriggled against the wall and drew up his knees. Minghal came swiftly towards him, intent only on his murderous design. Suddenly out shot the prisoner's bound feet; they caught the stooping fakir square on the knees. He reeled back against the loose matting of the doorway, and stumbled against one of the crowd whom the fire had summoned.

The man hurled him aside. He fell and was trampled by the feet of others. There were cries all around; some were shouting for water, others were beating at the burning roof with their swords; no one paid heed to the man on the ground. Bruised with kicks he wriggled through the press until he

came near the gate; then, in full sight of the sentry, he raised his hands and piously besought the aid of Allah to save the dwellings of the faithful.

Meanwhile the British officers had run up to the scene of the conflagration. First of them was Lieutenant Hawes, the adjutant. The men fell back from him as he pushed his way towards the blazing hut.

"Where are the men?" he cried. "Is any one inside?"

"That we know not, sahib," replied a Gurkha.

"We cannot see through the smoke, sahib," added a tall Afridi; "we are beating out the flames."

"Idiots!" cried the lieutenant. "Out of the way!"

He rushed through the entrance. The hut was so full of smoke that for a moment he could see nothing. Then he caught sight of a figure against the wall: a trooper with his arms crossed on his face to defend it from the shreds of burning thatch that were falling. His legs were drawn up to avoid the flames from a charpoy already half consumed. Thinking he was unconscious, Lieutenant Hawes seized him by the feet and hauled him by main force into the open air.

"Who is it?" asked Lumsden, standing there with Dr. Bellew.

The prostrate trooper moved his arms.

"Ahmed!" cried the adjutant. "You had no business in the hut. Get up!"

Ahmed wriggled, but could neither stand nor speak.

"Let me see," said the doctor, stooping. "Why, God bless me, he is gagged and tied up!"

He slit the cords and removed the gag, and Ahmed got up on his feet. He was half suffocated, and his eyes were red, and watering with the smoke.

"There's some devilry here," cried Lumsden. "Bellew, take him to my quarters. Hawes, see that nobody leaves the fort. Some of you men put out the fire and then go quietly to your beds."

The gates were by this time shut. When Lieutenant Hawes asked the sentry whether he had noticed any suspicious characters leaving the fort, he replied—

"No, sahib. The last to go before I shut the gate was a holy fakir, who besought Allah that we might be saved from the fire."

CHAPTER THE TENTH

The Delhi Road

"Just overhaul him, doctor," said Lumsden, when he reached his quarters with Ahmed. "He has had a narrow squeak."

"Hair singed, eyes a trifle inflamed; nothing else wrong," said the doctor, after a rapid examination. "Who tied you up, youngster?"

"Let us begin at the beginning," Lumsden interposed. "What were you doing in that hut?"

Ahmed told his story in as few words as possible. The officers did not interrupt him until he began to relate what he had heard the pretended fakir say about the Maulavi. Then Lumsden brought his fist down heavily on the table before him and said—

"That's the rascal I saw at Lahore a few months ago, without a doubt—a tall, lean, lantern-jawed fellow with a beak like the old Duke's. They told me he seemed to be very busy, though no one knew what his business was. Now, Ahmed, could you judge by what you heard whether this fakir had spoken to any other men in the corps?"

"I do not think he had, sahib. He was persuading these men to speak to the others."

"Very well. Go on with your story."

Ahmed repeated, as nearly as he could remember them, the actual words used by the fakir, and then described how he had been seized and carried, bound, into the tent, and lay gagged while his captors discussed how they should dispose of him. When he had related the manner in which he had set the hut on fire, Lumsden looked pleased.

"It was a good thought, and cleverly done, my lad. That's the kind of thing I like to see in my Guides—quickness, decision, willingness to take risks. I

shall keep my eye on you. But now, you fellows," he added in English, the other officers having entered the room, "what are we to do about an explanation? The men will be desperately excited, you may be sure; those three scoundrels must be marked off as deserters, and Ahmed must have some tale for the rest of the men."

"Say they were in a funk at burning down the hut," suggested Lieutenant Battye.

"Won't wash, Quintin. The punishment would only be stopping of leave or something of that kind: none of the men would run away from that."

"Ask the youngster," said the adjutant. "These Pathans are good at fairy tales."

The question was put to Ahmed.

"It might be done thus, sahib," said the boy. "The fakir was not a true fakir. He is one Minghal, once chief of Mandan, and we blew up his tower and captured his village."

"I remember. Sherdil told me of that little piece of trickery—a box of porcelain from Delhi, eh? Well?"

"He is my enemy, sahib. We could say that he came to kill me, and indeed he tried to stick his knife into me just before Hawes Sahib came, but I kicked him down. The rest might be told even as it happened, except for what the fakir said."

"Very good. An excellent notion: you others agree? You shall tell them that. Now get to your hut: you have done very well."

Ahmed saluted and went away. He found Sherdil awaiting him in great excitement. The story he told seemed perfectly convincing. The conduct of Minghal was just what might have been expected of him, and the three Guides who abetted him clearly had no other course than to take flight. And the explanation spread through the whole corps next day, and was accepted with equal belief.

When Ahmed had gone, the officers sat up far into the night discussing the incident. It indicated the possibility of grave disorders arising. They were

all aware of an undercurrent of disaffection in many regiments of the native army. Apart from the fears aroused by the threatened introduction of the new cartridge, there were other causes of discontent and suspicion, both among the sepoys and the native population generally. The native officers did not take kindly to the system of promotion by seniority instead of by merit. Slight instances of insubordination had been too leniently dealt with by the officers, and the men had begun to regard themselves as of vast importance. Tales had been spread of the difficulties of the British army in the Crimea; many of the sepoys believed that it had been almost entirely destroyed, and the British prestige had fallen in consequence. They had a grievance, too, in the matter of foreign service. When they were enlisted they were expressly guaranteed against service over sea. But the Government, with reprehensible disregard of this engagement, ordered some native regiments to sail across the dreaded kala pani, and when they refused, neither enforced the order nor punished the refusal as mutiny. Since then a law had been passed withdrawing the reservation in the case of new recruits, and the older men believed that the guarantee was to be no longer observed in their case.

Attempts to graft Western ideas and customs on an Oriental people had embittered the populace generally. Changes in the land system which had prevailed from time immemorial had exasperated the zamindars. Interference with the native customs in regard to succession had enraged the princes, and the recent annexation of the province of Oudh had alienated an immense population from which the native regiments were largely recruited.

These and other matters bred a spirit of unrest and distrust, and made the minds of the sepoys fit soil for the seeds of disaffection which religious fanatics were beginning to sow among them.

The possibility of a general rising caused grave disquiet to a few of the more thoughtful of the British authorities—those who knew the natives best, and were aware of the lengths to which superstition might drive them. But the great majority were blind to what was passing under their eyes, and disregarded the warnings of the keener-sighted. Even when, on February 27, the 19th Native Infantry at Barhampur rose in mutiny, impelled by a panic fear that the greased cartridges were to be forced on them at the

muzzles of our guns, the incident was regarded as an isolated eruption instead of a symptom of general uneasiness, and a strange lack of firmness was shown in dealing with it. "A little fire is quickly trodden out which, being suffered, rivers cannot quench."

Major Lumsden felt that he could trust the Guides. They were not affected by many of the matters that agitated the other native regiments. Their officers had shown such tact and wisdom in respecting their religious scruples that the men had no fears of enforced conversion to the Christian faith. Peculiar ties of personal loyalty and devotion bound officers and men together; the latter had "eaten the sahibs' salt," and had developed a singular pride in the honour of the corps. They had, further, a vast contempt for the sepoys of the native regiments of the line. The latter assumed insufferable airs of superiority towards the Sikhs, Panjabis, and hill-men, from whom the Guides were mainly recruited, and turned the cold shoulder on such of them as enlisted in their own regiments. But though Lumsden had this confidence in his men's loyalty, he was not blind to the necessity of watchfulness. At the first hint of trouble he gave orders that any wandering fakir who might be discovered in the neighbourhood of the fort should be intercepted and severely dealt with.

A few weeks after news arrived of the rising at Barhampur, Lumsden left Hoti-Mardan at the head of his mission to Kabul. Among the officers who accompanied him was Dr. Bellew. The command of the Guides during his absence was given by Sir John Lawrence to Captain Daly, commander of the 1st Panjab Cavalry. The Guides awaited with considerable curiosity the arrival of their new commander. He reached Hoti-Mardan at sunset on the 28th of April, and the genial manner of his address to the men on the parade-ground next day, coupled with his reputation as a gallant soldier, won their instant confidence.

"Daly Sahib is a good man," said Sherdil to Ahmed, "though in truth he has not so much hair as Lumsden Sahib."

Thus he alluded to his new commander's premature baldness. Sherdil was rejoicing in the rank of naik, to which Lumsden had promoted him before leaving the fort. The good fellow was perfectly convinced that he owed his new dignity not merely to his merits, but to the broad hint he had given his

commander, and suggested that Ahmed should look out for an opportunity to make a similar suggestion to Daly Sahib.

"I must wait until I have been in the corps as long as you," replied Ahmed, with a laugh.

Daly had been but a fortnight in his command when he received grave news in a letter from Colonel Edwardes at Peshawar. Edwardes had heard by telegraph that on Sunday, the 10th of May, the sepoys at Meerut had mutinied. Five days before, when cartridges were served out to the men of the 3rd Native Light Cavalry for the parade ordered for the next morning, eighty-five troopers refused to receive them. They were tried for this breach of discipline by a court-martial of native officers, and condemned to various terms of imprisonment. On the evening of the following Sunday, when the bells were tolling for church, the sepoys of the 11th and 20th line regiments and the 3rd Cavalry broke out of their lines, and while some set fire to the bungalows of the Europeans, others hastened to the prison, loosened the gratings of the cells, and dragged out their manacled comrades. Their fetters were struck off; then the mutineers set off on a mad riot of destruction, burning houses, smashing furniture, massacring every white man and woman whom they met.

General Hewitt had with him at Meerut a regiment of cavalry, the 60th Rifles, and a large force of artillery. With incredible lack of enterprise he kept them at bivouac during the night, allowing the mutinous sepoys to set off unmolested on the thirty-six miles' march to Delhi. Horse and foot made all haste through the darkness, reached the Jumna at sunrise, crossed by the bridge of boats, and entered the gates of Delhi exultant. Their arrival was the signal for a general rising. They massacred without mercy all the English people upon whom they could lay hands, men, women and children, and the streets of the ancient city were a scene of plunder and butchery.

With this terrible news Daly received orders to march for Delhi with the Guides. The men had been fasting all day: it was Ramzan, the Mohammedan Lent; but at six o'clock the same evening they set off, five hundred strong, a hundred and fifty being cavalry, on their long march of five hundred and eighty miles. At midnight they reached Nowshera, the first

stage of their journey, and were up again at daybreak. It was the hottest season of the year; the sun beat mercilessly down upon them; and the burning march to Attock, the next stage, taxed their endurance to the uttermost. But not a man fell out, and after resting until two o'clock next morning they were on foot again, springing up with cheerful alacrity at the sound of the bugle. A dust-storm swept upon them as they started; they plodded steadily through it, marched for thirty-two miles with only the briefest halts, rested during the day at Boran, and were off again soon after midnight on the next stage of thirty-two miles to Jani-ki-sang.

Another night march brought them to Rawal Pindi. There they heard how the mutiny was spreading—a terrible tale of rapine, incendiarism and massacre; and—a little light amid the darkness—how native princes in various parts were showing a noble loyalty, and placing their swords at the service of the British. There, too, Sir John Lawrence reviewed the corps, gave the men unstinted praise for their patience and endurance under fatigue, and did all he could for their comfort. He spoke to many men personally as he passed down the lines, and, halting before Ahmed, said in his gruff voice—

"Where did I see you last, young man?"

"At Peshawar, sahib, when I spoke to your honour about my father, Rahmut Khan."

"Ah yes, I remember. I am glad to see you in such good company."

And he passed on, leaving Ahmed in a glow of pleasure.

Night after night the march continued. Sometimes the troopers dozed on their horses and had to dismount and go on foot in order to keep themselves awake. Even that remedy failed, and once Ahmed slept as he walked, and still trudged on when the rest halted, until Sherdil took him by the shoulder and shook him into wakefulness.

Early in the morning of June 6, when the corps had been marching for more than three weeks, they arrived at Karnal, about three days' march from Delhi, their goal. They had scarcely halted when Mr. Le Bas, the magistrate, came to Captain Daly with a request that he would destroy two or three villages in the neighbourhood whose inhabitants had proved very

troublesome and were threatening the lines of communication. Daly was loath to delay; there was sterner work before him than the operations of a police officer; but the magistrate being very pressing, he at last consented to devote a day to the work required. After a few hours' rest a portion of the Guides marched out to the villages in question, forced their way into them with the loss of one man killed and three wounded, and set fire to the houses.

A party of about a dozen Guides, Ahmed among them, with Sherdil at their head, set off to ride down a body of armed villagers mounted on hardy country-bred ponies. The Guides' horses were feeling the strain of the previous three weeks' marching, while the villagers' mounts were fresh; but it was a point of honour with the Guides never to let their enemy escape, and Sherdil pushed on for mile after mile, gradually overhauling the fugitives. Captain Daly's orders were that no prisoners were to be taken; not one of the hapless villagers escaped.

As the little party was returning at a foot pace to rejoin their comrades, they caught sight of a group of bearers carrying a palki, and escorted by a couple of horsemen. Thinking it probable that the palki contained a village headman endeavouring to escape in a vehicle ordinarily used only by native ladies, Sherdil decided to give chase; it would be a notable feather in his cap if he could march into Karnal and hand over to Captain Daly the ringleader in the recent troubles.

"Daly Sahib will make me a dafadar at once," he said, with a chuckle, to Ahmed. "True, the palki may hold no person at all, but only treasure; I know their ways. But we shall have something for our pains, Ahmed-ji."

The men carrying the palki could not go quickly, but they were more than a mile distant, and the Guides' horses were so done up that they were incapable of more than a canter. Still, unless the quarry should be able to hide, they might be overtaken in the course of a quarter of an hour. Sherdil led the way, the sowars following in a scattered line. They had scarcely ridden three or four hundred yards when they came suddenly to a deep nullah. Sherdil attempted to leap his horse over it, but the animal was too wearied for the effort; it failed to clear the gully, and fell with its rider. The trooper next behind his leader met with the same mishap. Then came

Ahmed. Being a little in the rear of the others, he had had time to prepare for the leap, and his horse Ruksh, besides being superior to the rest, was less fatigued through having had to carry a lighter weight. He took the leap gamely and landed safely on the other side, although with only an inch or two to spare.

Being safely over, Ahmed pulled up his horse and called down to Sherdil to hear if he was hurt.

"A sprained ankle, no more, Allah be praised," his friend replied.

"And the horse?"

"I am feeling his joints. Do not wait, Ahmed-ji; ride after the sons of perdition. Hai! It will not be I that am made a dafadar, but you a naik. It is fate. Go on; we will follow."

Ahmed at once set his horse to a gallop. The palki-wallahs were out of sight now, hidden by a slight wooded undulation of the ground. Eager that they should not escape him, and fired with the excitement of the chase, Ahmed did not wait to see how the rest of his comrades fared, but pressed on as fast as he could. He glanced round once and saw that the troopers had halted on the further side of the nullah; but he had no doubt that they would soon find a means of crossing or skirting it and follow at his heels.

As he reached the crest of the rising ground, he saw the fugitives hurrying across the plain not more than half-a-mile distant. Apparently they were aware of the chase, for they were straining every effort, and the horsemen every now and then plied the flats of their swords vigorously on the bearers' backs to encourage them. Again they disappeared from Ahmed's view, entering a small copse. He gave Ruksh a touch of the spur, followed the party through the copse, and caught sight of them again, now no more than two hundred yards away.

The two horsemen were at some little distance apart. They were both somewhat corpulent, and there was no look of the warrior about them. One of them turned, and, catching sight of the figure in khaki coming at speed, he shouted to his companion and then dug his spurs into his horse and rode with all haste towards a patch of woodland beyond. Ahmed set him down as a cowardly Hindu, yet felt some surprise at his flight. Surely six men might have the courage to try conclusions with a single horseman. If he had had time to think he might have concluded that the runaway was not aware that his pursuer was for the moment alone; but having previously seen the whole party of Guides, feared that they were close behind. Whatever his thoughts may have been, his companion was made of sterner stuff. He disregarded

the other's warning shout; at the very instant when his companion fled, he wheeled his horse and stood to face the attack.

Ahmed now saw that the man had a pistol in one hand and a talwar in the other. But it was clear that he was not a practised combatant. Had he taken aim without flurry he could have shot Ahmed with ease, for the lad's carbine was empty, all his powder and shot having been used up during the recent fight. The horseman took a hurried snap-shot at him, and missed. At the moment when the man fired Ahmed was approaching him from the near side. By a slight touch on the flank of his horse—a touch so slight that an ordinary horse in full gallop would have been quite unaffected by it—he changed the direction of the arab and came up on the off-side of his adversary. The man seemed bewildered by the sudden change in the point of attack. Before he could swing round to parry the stroke, Ahmed's sword caught him at the shoulder; he toppled sideways from his saddle to the ground; and his horse bolted.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

The Missy Sahib

During this little encounter the bearers had done what might have been expected of men of their class. They had set the palki down, and stared in open-mouthed confusion, irresolutely watching the course of events. When Ahmed had disposed of his opponent, who lay groaning on the ground, they laid hands on the poles as if to make an attempt to escape with their burden. But Ahmed called to them to stand fast. He used words of Urdu, the common language of Hindustan, though to him it was a foreign tongue. The Guides, being drawn from many different races of the north-west, had developed a patois of their own—a strange compound of hill dialects with Urdu and even English. Ahmed in his early childhood had learnt to prattle in Urdu with his ayah and the other servants, and in Hoti-Mardan he had quickly picked up more than he had known before, so that his cry was quite intelligible to the bearers. But even if they had not understood his words, they could have been under no misapprehension of the meaning of his tone. They let the palki fall again, and stood trembling.

"What have you got in the palki?" asked Ahmed sharply.

The men remained silent, looking one at another: it was as though none cared to accept the responsibility of being spokesman. Ahmed had contemptuously sheathed his sword after the fall of his adversary, the cringing bearers being of no account to a Pathan. But now he made a movement as if to draw it again. It was enough. The four men made haste to speak at once, and in faltering tones confessed that there was a person in the palki.

"The headman?" cried Ahmed quickly.

"Not so. It is not a man."

"One of his wives, then?"

"Not so, O strong one: verily it is a person of the Feringhis; a missy sahib."

A missy sahib! This was strange news. Ahmed scarcely knew what to make of it.

"How comes the missy sahib here?" he asked.

"Thy servants tell the truth," said one of the men. "The missy sahib was taken this very morning by the master that now lies on the ground."

"Taken? Where from? What means this? Speak the truth, and quickly, or verily, thou son of a dog, my sword will taste somewhat of thy jellied flesh."

"This is the truth," said the man. "The missy sahib was in the city of the king, but she escaped the killing by the aid of an ayah and a khitmutgar, who took her to the housetop of a man that was friendly to the sahibs. But there were some that suspected he was not faithful to the true king Bahadur Shah——"

"Dog, remember that I serve the sahibs, and name not that master of cut-throats to me."

"Have mercy, O right-hand of the sahibs, we are but poor men. It was as thy servant said: some suspected him of favouring the sahibs, and the housetop was no longer a safe place for the missy sahib. So the ayah clad her as our women are clothed, and put ornaments about her arms and feet, and a veil over her face, and by ill-luck they passed through the gates——"

"By ill-luck, thou dog! 'Twas by the favour of Heaven."

"How should our humbleness know? They came through the gates—by the favour of Heaven—the missy sahib being called the new wife of one of the princes. We were even on our way—the missy sahib, and the ayah, and the khitmutgar, and we hired bearers also—to Karnal, when behold we were met by a zamindar of the village which your mightiness has laid waste this day. To him—it is even he that lieth now at the point of death—the khitmutgar said even as I have told, that in the palki sat the new wife of one of the princes of Delhi, supposing that he would salaam and pass on with reverence. But he saw through their pretence, and demanded that the cover

should be lifted that he might see the noble lady with his own eyes. And behold, the missy sahib, being hot and in a great fear, had taken the veil from her face, and sat even as the shameless women of the Feringhis——"

"Son and grandson of dogs," cried Ahmed, "tell thy tale without this insolence, or verily I will slice thee and leave thee for carrion."

"I but repeat the words of the zamindar, O merciful. He cried out with great laughter when he saw the white face of the missy sahib, and bade us carry the palki to his village. And but a little after we had entered came one running, to say that your mightinesses were riding fast upon the place. The zamindar is not a man of war, and he lay for a time in his house, hoping that if his face was not seen by the Feringhis he would escape the edge of the sword. But when it was told him that the men of Lumsden Sahib had entered and were burning, he stowed some jewels in his pockets, and placed more in the palki—they are even beneath the cushion whereon the missy sahib sits—and he bade us hasten out of the gate with the palki, purposing to reach Gungah, ten koss to the north-east, and there dwell with his brother. And then thou didst come upon us like a swift breath, and the zamindar hath not escaped the edge of the sword. It is fate: who can strive against it? I have spoken the truth."

"Well for thee!" cried Ahmed. "And what became of the ayah and the khitmutgar?"

"Truly we left them in the house, and without doubt they are burnt up in the flames kindled by the Feringhis' servants."

Ahmed was nonplussed. He looked round for Sherdil and his party; there was no sign of them. The sooner he rejoined them the better. Suddenly he heard a voice from the interior of the palki; it was thrown open, and turning, he saw the face of a young English girl.

"You are a friend of the sahibs?" she said in faltering Urdu.

"Truly," said Ahmed, and then stood speechless. Into his mind came a dim recollection of having seen ladies such as this long years before, when he was a tiny child, before that terrible day when his father had been killed in his tent. The girl's voice recalled other voices; he seemed to hear them speaking to him, and to see tall ladies with unveiled faces bending over

him, and—yes, surely one of them had given him the wooden sword which had so much amused Rahmut Khan when he had first seen him, and another had given him a little horse, on which his ayah used to draw him about the room.

"You will help me?" said the girl again in the native speech.

"Yes!" Ahmed was on the point of telling the girl that he was English like herself; she would then have greater confidence in him. But he checked himself; it was not time for that, especially with Hindus in hearing and possible danger all around. "I will help the missy sahib," he said. "What would the missy sahib wish me to do?"

"Oh, I do not know. I cannot tell what would be best. My father and mother were killed in Delhi" (her speech was broken by sobs), "and many of my friends, and I do not know whether even one of them escaped. If you take me to the sahibs you shall have much bakshish."

"I am of the Guides of Lumsden Sahib," said Ahmed simply. And then he bade the men lift the palki with its fair burden and follow him. They left the zamindar where he lay.

He reached the nullah about half-an-hour after he had left it. To his surprise, Sherdil and his comrades had disappeared. Examining their tracks he saw that they must have gone back the way they had come. Why had they deserted him? He felt uneasy. It was already late in the afternoon; Karnal, so far as he could judge after his riding across country, was at least three koss distant; and no doubt between that town and the place where he now was there were scores of villagers whose homes had been burnt, but who had themselves been more lucky than the zamindar, and escaped.

He made for the shelter of an adjacent copse, so that the party might at least be safe from observation while he decided what to do. When they were among the trees, Ahmed ordered the men to squat down beside the palki and beware of his sword if they attempted to move. A sudden rush of four men upon one would have been dangerous; but these palki-wallahs were not enterprising, and Ahmed's bold and contemptuous attitude did not encourage them to run any risks. Keeping a wary eye on them, however, he went a little apart to consider.

It was drawing towards night, and he was, as he guessed, several koss from Karnal, the nearest place where he knew there were white men. He could not ride thither and bring help for fear of what might happen during his absence. If the party set off to walk, they might easily lose the way, and possibly encounter bands of hostile villagers or even roving mutineers. In a few hours the Guides would no doubt leave Karnal for their usual night march, and his duty was to rejoin them as soon as possible. It seemed on the whole best to remain in hiding until darkness fell, and then attempt to reach the Delhi road, so as either to intercept the Guides, or, if they had already passed, to follow in their tracks. Whether he could gain the road in the darkness would depend mainly on the knowledge of the palki-wallahs, for though his own sense of locality and direction was keen, as became one accustomed to wander among the hills of the Afghan border, his course had been so erratic since he left Karnal with the Guides in the morning that he was now quite at a loss.

There was one risk to be guarded against: the escape of any of the men in the darkness. If one of them should get away, he might bring the whole countryside down upon the party. A few minutes' thought sufficed to settle that problem. As a preliminary, Ahmed made the men hand over their knives to him; the rest of his device he would put in operation when the time for starting came.

The party was not unprovided with food. Ahmed had already seen the men eating chapatis, which they had taken from their wallets, and when he went up to the palki to acquaint the missy sahib with his purpose he found her eating some fruit. The zamindar had shown forethought in thus providing against a possibly prolonged march. Ahmed found it rather difficult to explain his design to the girl, whose stock of Urdu extended little further than the ordinary phrases used between masters and servants. The girl acquiesced in his plan; she was indeed too frightened, and too anxious to gain a shelter with white people, to be able to criticize or suggest.

Before it became completely dark, Ahmed collected some long strands of a creeping plant that grew plentifully in the copse. With these he tied the bearers two by two together, in such a way that while their movements in carrying the palki would not be sensibly impeded, any attempt to take flight would be hopeless. The legs of the two men who went in front were

fastened to those of the two behind, so that when they set off they would have to keep step. He had never seen a three-legged race; but if they tried to run away the result would be not unlike that when two boys insufficiently practised in that sport attempt to run: one would trip the other. The ends of the strands were so firmly knotted that they could not be undone easily, and Ahmed would have plenty of time to catch the men if they were so ill-advised as to bolt. These preparations having been made—not without sundry complaints and protests on the part of the men—Ahmed asked them whether they could find their way to the Delhi road. They eagerly professed that they knew the way perfectly; they were, in fact, so desirous of getting rid of this masterful Pathan that they would have agreed to lead him anywhere. He made them understand that any attempt at treachery would be fatal to them, while, on the other hand, there would be much bakshish if the missy sahib was brought safely to her friends. Then, a little after darkness had fallen, he mounted his horse, which had meanwhile been quietly browsing, bade the men take their places at the poles, and gave the order to start.

They marched on steadily for an hour or more, then took a short rest and set off again. Ahmed was by no means easy in mind. While he felt pretty sure that there was no enemy in sufficient force across the Delhi road to interrupt communications, he suspected that the whole country was infested with disaffected persons, and that parties of rebels and robbers were roving about, ready to swoop down upon any one worth plundering. It would matter nothing whether such a person were well or ill affected to the sahibs: unless he were accompanied by an adequate escort he would stand small chance against the rebel troops and the lawless element of the population, who had taken advantage of the disturbances to plunder their own countrymen and the hated Feringhis impartially. As he rode, therefore, Ahmed was ever on the alert to catch the first sound of a body of men approaching, or anything that should indicate the neighbourhood of a village.

But nothing occurred to cause alarm. The party marched on, through fields, over slight nullahs and across small streams, until, some time after midnight, they struck into a broad dusty track which the men said was the high-road to Delhi. Here Ahmed called a halt, and sat his horse intently listening. Had the Guides passed? he wondered. For the moment he could

not tell. He heard nothing but the faint barking of dogs in the distance. He asked the men the name of the village whence the sound came. It was Panipat, they told him, about six koss south of Karnal, and probably half-a-koss from where they were at that moment standing. He was in a quandary. If the Guides had not passed, it would be well to wait for them. On the other hand, if they had passed he stood a poor chance of overtaking them. Well he knew the rate at which they could march! The four bearers, encumbered with the palki, could not move at anything like the pace of the Guides. He dared not leave them; they could not be relied on, no matter what bakshish were promised, when it was a Feringhi lady who was concerned: they might get more bakshish by delivering her up. He thought for a moment of setting her behind him on his arab and making a dash for Karnal, where she would be safe with Le Bas Sahib; but Panipat was in the way: if it were not held by the sahibs the risk was too great. On the other hand, even if he knew that the Guides were now on the road south of him, he might not overtake them before daylight, and no doubt there were other villages to pass through. Were the girl seen by any passing native, he would soon have every freebooter of the countryside upon his tracks, for he knew the extraordinary speed with which the news of such a discovery would travel. Then, his horse bearing a double burden, he could scarcely hope to outride any pursuers.

But, since delay was dangerous, it was necessary for him to make up his mind to some course, and he thought it best to push along the highway southward, keeping a sharp look-out for hostile parties. No doubt he would have sufficient warning of their presence to give him time to find some temporary hiding-place by the roadside. The absence of any sound from the north persuaded him that the Guides had already passed, and then he bethought himself that he might possibly prove it by examining the dust of the road. Dismounting, he struck a light with flint and steel, ignited his tinder, and, shielding it with his pagri, blew up a sufficient glow to throw a faint light on the road. The dust was marked with a great number of foot-prints, both of men and of horses, many of them so blurred as to be indistinguishable. But after a little Ahmed's trained eye noticed several which were clearer than the rest; without doubt they were made by the horses coming at the end of a troop. He easily distinguished the four hoof-marks of a single horse: the mark of the hind-foot coming close behind that

of the fore-foot: and by the distance between the successive impressions he knew that the horse had been going at a walking pace. The print was very like that which would be made by the shoe of one of the horses of the Guides; and the evidence was so clear that a considerable troop had passed along the road not many hours before that he felt sure his comrades were ahead of him.

He wondered whether there was any chance of catching them up. It occurred to him that he might quicken the pace of the party by relieving the palki-wallahs of their burden for a time, so he asked the missy sahib, through one of the men, to alight and mount his horse while he led the animal. Tired as she was of her cramped position in the palki, and not a little discommoded by the jolting movements of the vehicle as the men trudged over the rough ground, the girl consented with alacrity. Thus lightened, the men stepped forward at a good pace—probably as fast as the Guides, whose progress was of course limited by the marching power of the infantry portion of the corps.

The march continued for several hours at a brisk rate. They skirted one village by making a detour into the fields beside the road. When they returned to the highway Ahmed noticed that the men were flagging; the palki, even without its occupant, was no light weight to bearers who had already carried it for many hours; and one of the men plucked up courage to tell their hard taskmaster that his strength was failing. But Ahmed could not venture to delay. In a fierce whisper he bade the man, who had dropped his pole, bringing the party momentarily to a halt, to push on, if he valued his life. The man obeyed with a groan, but the party had not gone much further when the girl, who had hitherto endured the fatigues and anxieties of the journey without a murmur, suddenly broke down. She would have fallen from the horse but for Ahmed's arm, and when he had carried her back to the palki he found that she had fainted. He was utterly ignorant of what to do to restore her; nothing of the kind had ever come within his experience before. But one of the men explained that she must have water, and volunteered to go and find a brook; he had a small lotah with him. Ahmed dared not trust him; the reasons for not leaving the party himself were as cogent as ever; there was nothing for it but that the whole party should leave the road and search for a stream.

The girl recovered from her swoon before their search was rewarded. Then she broke into a fit of weeping, which to Ahmed was almost as alarming. But a draught from a brook they by and by discovered revived her, and they returned to the road. The delay had cost them a good hour.

It was nearing daybreak when Ahmed heard the sound of trotting horses on the road behind. He instantly ordered the bearers to make for a patch of woodland bordering the roadside. He hoped that the horses might prove to be those of the Guides, but it was necessary to prepare for the worst. It was useless to attempt any deception in case the horsemen turned out to be enemies and discovered him: his khaki uniform would betray him. If he should pretend to have deserted from the Guides and joined the mutineers, a word from one of the palki-wallahs would be his undoing. The only chance was to remain in hiding in the copse and trust that the riders would pass by. He wondered whether any of the bearers would have sufficient courage to cry out, and so disclose their hiding-place. Dismounting from his horse, he handed the girl his knife, and stood over the four men with his sword drawn, bidding them not to make a sound if they valued their lives.

They had been but a minute or two in their place of concealment when the horsemen came up at a trot. It was still very dark, but Ahmed, peering out from among the trees, was able to see them dimly, and thought from their general appearance, and the sounds made by the horses' furnishings as they trotted past, that they were sowars. If that were the case, it was almost certain that they were mutineers; he knew that they were not Guides because they were riding in one compact troop, without an advance guard. As nearly as he could guess, they numbered about fifty.

They passed by; the immediate danger was over. But it was disconcerting to find a body of the enemy now between him and the Guides. He wondered for a moment whether the Guides were after all behind them, but dismissed that idea when he remembered the leisurely pace of the horsemen who had just gone by; they would have made greater speed had they feared pursuit. There was clearly need for redoubled carefulness. Ahmed waited a full quarter of an hour after the troop had ridden by before he gave the word to proceed. Then he went after them slowly, listening more intently than ever, both for sounds from ahead, in case they should return, and for sounds from behind, in case others were following. But after a time the tramping of the

receding horses faded quite away; he heard nothing from the opposite direction, and hoped that with the morning light he would reach the bivouac of the Guides.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

Bluff

Before morning broke, however, it was clear that the march must be intermitted. The girl was in no condition to walk, nor could she sit the horse; and the palki-wallahs, men of no great stamina or muscular development, were worn out. Bitterly as he deplored the necessity, Ahmed saw that further progress was impossible for the present, and promised the men that if they would hold out until the dawn, which must be at hand, he would let them have a long rest. He was still hoping that daylight would reveal the encampment of the Guides.

Very soon afterwards the sky lightened, and he saw nothing but the long dusty road and the wide plain on either side. It would clearly be unsafe to continue the journey now that they could be seen, so a hiding-place must be found where they might lie up in comparative comfort during the day. The men were so exhausted that he ventured now for the first time to leave them, to search for a hiding-place himself. At a little distance from the road he discovered a nullah, and, scrambling up the bed of the watercourse, now nearly dry, he came upon a spot overgrown with thorn and brambles, which would shelter the whole party, save, perhaps, the horse. He retraced his steps, explained to the girl what he proposed to do, and led the horse in advance of the party to the place of concealment. When they were settled there, he found, a little higher up, a tall bush standing almost as high as the horse's head, and there he left the animal, speaking to him, and knowing that the faithful beast would not move from the spot until his master called him.

The bed of the watercourse was fairly steep. Two or three tall trees overhung it. Ahmed thought by climbing one of these he might get a view of the surrounding country. He managed to make the girl understand that he wished her to watch the bearers, and use the knife upon any of them who should attempt to escape or call out. Even if she had not the nerve for such

action, he thought that the men, having heard what he said, might shrink from putting the matter to the test.

Then he scrambled up the side of the nullah and nimbly climbed the tallest tree. What he saw from his perch was not reassuring. A little to the right of the road, perhaps a koss distant, a troop of horsemen, dismounted, were resting at the edge of a small plantation, which concealed them from any one passing along the highway. Beyond them the ground rose slightly, scarcely enough to be called a hill, and yet sufficiently to cut off any more extended view southward. Far away on all sides stretched open country, with little vegetation except patches of scrub. Many miles to the left he fancied he descried the white roofs of a village, but in front the road ran between almost bare plains.

Ahmed guessed that the plantation at which the men were resting surrounded a tank where they had watered their horses. He had no doubt that they were those who had passed in the night. Yet he wondered why they had halted at that particular spot, for if it was a tank, there was in all probability a village on the other side of the rising ground. He watched them for a time, and presently saw a man riding towards them from round the shoulder of the hillock. As he reached them, some of the dismounted men crowded about him; in the distance they looked to Ahmed like flies clustering. After a time two of them mounted their horses, and accompanied the new-comer along the high-road in the direction of Delhi. When they came near the crest of the rising ground they halted and dismounted. One of the men held the horses in the middle of the road, while the others went on foot to the top, and gradually disappeared as they descended on the further side. The third man remained motionless with the horses in the road.

Ahmed felt interested. What were they about? What lay beyond the hillock?

After a while he saw two figures reappear on the skyline. They were no doubt the same two, for they walked down to the man with the horses, mounted, and trotted back to the main body. A few minutes afterwards two other men left the plantation and rode up the acclivity as the others had done, dismounting also before they reached the top. While one held the horses the other ascended the slope, with a slowness that spoke of caution, and went out of sight as the others had done before him. Ahmed looked for

him to return after an interval, but minute after minute slipped away and still he did not reappear. Had he gone on some scouting errand, or perhaps to take post as sentry? It was clear that on the further side of the hillock something was going on in which the horsemen on this side were keenly interested.

All at once the explanation occurred to Ahmed. The Guides were without doubt encamped beyond the hillock. It had been their practice all through the march from Mardan to halt in the early morning. The horsemen at the plantation were probably a roving band of mutinous sowars from Delhi, who had been raiding, and now found the Guides between them and the city. To obtain confirmation of his conclusions, Ahmed slipped down from the tree and asked one of the men whether there was a village beyond the hillock.

"Truly there is," said the man, "and it is some seventeen koss from Karnal."

This was the distance the Guides might be expected to march during the night.

"And how far is it from us?" he asked.

"Thy servant knows not with any certainty, but maybe it is two koss."

It was a tantalizing situation to be in. Ahmed felt sure that his comrades were encamped within an hour's march of him and yet he could not reach them. Why had the sowars halted at the plantation instead of returning to Delhi by some roundabout route? And yet, he reflected, even if they were not there, he could hardly dare to move on in the broad daylight. There were the same dangers to be feared as had determined his previous conduct.

The position was delicate enough. The sowars might take alarm. In that case they would probably retreat to find some shelter, and might easily come upon the very nullah in which the little party was concealed. The Guides would no doubt remain in their encampment for the greater part of the day, moving on again when night fell. Even if the rebel horsemen should not be scared by any action of the Guides, it was always possible that some of them should take it into their heads to go a-roving. At any moment, too, a villager, a wandering mendicant, a kasid from one village to another, might cross the plain and get sight of the fugitives. There were

signs of footpaths, and passers-by would not need to come right up to the nullah before suspecting the presence of the hidden party, for Ruksh was but imperfectly concealed by the bush.

Moreover, the party would soon be in want of food. The bearers had with them provisions for only one day, and though Ahmed did not know how much food was in the palki, he suspected that it was very little: the zamindar would hardly have foreseen the possibility of so long a delay in reaching his brother's house. Ruksh could find some little sustenance in the leaves of the shrubs around him, but he would soon strip them bare. There was water in the bed of the nullah, and the bearers had already given the girl some in the lotah she had used before; they themselves of course, being Hindus, would not drink from the vessel which her lips had contaminated, but stooped and lapped up the running water. But none of the party was in a condition to wait through the long hours of an Indian day in the hottest season of the year, and then to undertake a night march, without more refreshment than it seemed possible for them to obtain. Ahmed thought over the situation with no little anxiety. To move away might be immediately fatal; the only alternative was to remain hidden on the chance of the sowars by and by moving off.

Once more Ahmed climbed the tree to keep watch. The sun rose higher and higher, and yet there was no sign of a movement among the party. But after some time he noticed the man who had gone over the brow of the hill returning. He came much faster than he had gone. Rejoining his waiting comrade, he mounted his horse, and the two galloped down to the rest. Instantly the whole party sprang to their feet, loosened their horses, and sprang into the saddle. A few even started to ride across the plain in a straight line for the nullah, and Ahmed feared that in a few minutes the fugitives would be discovered. He knew that if they were seen there was no help for them; with his single hand he could do nothing against a troop of horse. The sowars came on until they were within a hundred yards of the nullah, and Ahmed shrank back among the leaves, fearing lest he might be seen and so draw the men on. But they suddenly wheeled half round and cantered to the road, where they halted.

Their comrades meanwhile, though they had mounted their horses, had not left the plantation. Apparently they were waiting to see if the report brought

to them by their scout was correct. After some time they appeared to decide that it was a false alarm, for half-a-dozen now left the main body and rode up the hillock, dismounting as the others had done previously, and skirmishing forward over the crest. In a few minutes they returned and trotted back again. The smaller body who had taken panic returned slowly to rejoin their comrades. They all dismounted, tethered their horses, and once more stretched themselves at ease under the shade of the plantation.

Ahmed watched them for a long time. There was no sign of further movement among them. It looked as if they had settled down to doze through the hot hours of the day. The prospect of being kept at a standstill became more and more unendurable. To say nothing of the torture of remaining through the long hours of torrid heat without adequate protection or sufficient food, there was the danger that, if his journey could not be resumed until nightfall, he would reach the encampment of the Guides only to find them gone. Was it not possible, he wondered, in some way to get past or round the men who lay between him and safety? Obviously the whole party, with the palki, could not advance openly across the bare plain. Nor could he alone venture to go, in the tell-tale uniform of the Guides, to bring assistance to the missy sahib. If only he were clad in the costume of Shagpur he would have risked the attempt.

Suddenly a new idea crossed his mind. Was it possible to disguise himself? The palki-wallahs could not help him; they had little on but their loin-cloths. He wished he had stripped the zamindar whom he had left on the ground. There was not likely to be a spare dhoti in the palki. But he remembered the coloured hangings of that vehicle. If he tore those down and wound them over his khaki tunic, they might raise a question as to what his race and position were, but they would certainly never cause any one to suspect that he was one of the Guides.

Hitherto he had shrunk from leaving the missy sahib. But now the position was desperate. To die of fright, hunger, and exposure to the heat might be her fate; an accident might at any moment lead to her discovery; yet there was at least a chance that by carrying out the plan which had suggested itself to him he could secure her safety. The bearers had been cowed into submissiveness; the natives, for all their brave talk, were very amenable to stern and authoritative handling. Threats of grievous punishment on the one

hand, and promises of liberal bakshish on the other, might at any rate keep their wills in a state of oscillation, so that they would not make up their minds to any positive course. And if only the missy sahib would summon up a little resolution, and show that she meant to use the knife he had given her if they attempted to betray her whereabouts, he would feel a certain confidence in leaving her for a time. He could at any rate fasten them more tightly together. There were creepers growing on the sides of the nullah, and strands of these would make very serviceable bonds.

His resolution fixed, he climbed down the tree and crept to the palki. It was difficult for him to explain his purpose to the girl without the assistance of the bearers, but he did not wish them to know too much. The missy sahib herself was so depressed from anxiety and want of sleep, as well as from the effects of the heat, that she was slower to apprehend than she might otherwise have been. But he succeeded after a time in making her understand that he was going to bring help from the sahibs, who were very near at hand, and that during his absence she was to strike without compunction any of the bearers who tried either to free himself or to give an alarm. Then he cut lengths of creeper sufficient for his purpose, and tied the men's arms and legs together so that they could not move. He did not gag them; they were in a state of abject submission; and when he told them that the missy sahib would certainly kill them if they uttered a word above a whisper, they declared that they had no tongues until he gave them leave. Then he wrenched the muslin curtains of the palki from their fastenings, and with the missy sahib's help his khaki was soon entirely concealed.

As she twisted the stuff around him she suddenly said—

"There is a little black hole in your pagri, and the cloth is scorched around it. Did you know that?"

He did not understand her until at her bidding he took the pagri from his head, and she pointed to the spot. Then he remembered that the zamindar had fired almost point-blank at him, and did not doubt that the bullet had gone through his head-dress. But he had no words to explain this to the girl, and would hardly have done so if he could. It had been a narrow escape: a Pathan took such incidents as a matter of course.

Having made his preparations, he repeated his orders to the men, and led his horse gently up the nullah towards the road. It was now midday; the sun burnt at its fiercest; not a living soul was passing along the road, and the horsemen at the plantation were without doubt in a state of somnolence. It was not at all improbable that he might mount and ride some paces before he was seen. He crept quietly along the nullah until he reached the end, then sprang lightly into the saddle, walked the horse the few yards to the road, and urged it to a mad gallop towards Delhi. Some few seconds passed before the clatter of the hoofs was heard by the men dozing in the plantation; then some of them rose lazily to their feet and gazed at this strange figure in yellow and red tearing along so furiously. As soon as he was within hailing distance Ahmed flung up his arms and shouted—

"The Feringhis! The sahibs! They are upon us! Fly for your lives!"

The effect was magical. The lethargic sowars were galvanized into activity. Those who were already upon their feet rushed to their horses, unloosed them, and in a few moments were galloping at a headlong speed in a direction at right angles to the road. Those who had as yet been too sleepy or too incurious to rise sprang up and followed their comrades' example. Soon the whole party was scattered, each man riding as his fear directed him, the dust of the plain flying up in clouds from the heels of their horses. And still Ahmed rode on, crying lustily, "The sahibs are upon us!"

He breasted the hillock, topped the crest, and gained the other side. Then he saw what had so much occupied the sowars earlier in the day. Some three miles ahead of him the white tents of the Guides gleamed in the sunlight. Between him and them there was a small mounted patrol of the same corps. He gave a joyful shout, and Ruksh flew down the gentle slope with responsive gaiety. The men of the patrol caught sight of him as soon as he of them, though in the distance it was impossible to distinguish what or who he was. On he rode, and as he drew nearer he began to tear off the coloured muslin that disguised him. The khaki was disclosed. Wondering, the sowars of the patrol watched as he approached, shading their eyes against the sunbeams. Presently one of them recognized the horse; there was no horse like Ruksh in the corps. Then another shouted, "'Tis Ahmed!" and cantered to meet him.

"What news?" he cried.

But Ahmed galloped past, throwing a mere word of greeting to his comrades. Nor did he draw rein until he reached the commandant's quarters. Then his story was quickly told. Five minutes afterwards a half-troop rode out under Lieutenant Hawes, Ahmed leading the way. When they reached the crest there was no sign of the mutineers. They had utterly vanished off the plain. Riding down to the nullah, they found the palki-wallahs lying fast asleep in the shade of the bushes where Ahmed had left them, and the missy sahib asleep in the palki, grasping the knife. Ahmed flung himself from his horse, kicked the bearers awake, and cut their bonds. Meanwhile Lieutenant Hawes was trying to awaken the girl, speaking to her quietly so as not to startle her. His low tones making no impression, he touched her lightly on the arm. She sprang up with a shriek, lifting the knife. Then, seeing an English face, and hearing an English voice, she flung down the weapon and, to Lieutenant Hawes' amazement, fairly flung herself into his arms.

"Poor child! You are safe now," he said. "Here, you," he cried sharply to the palki-wallahs, "get to your poles; quickly!"

The four men hastened to obey, and the party set off to return to the camp.

"Your nobility will remember the bakshish," said one of them to Ahmed as they started.

"Chup! Am I not one of Lumsden Sahib's Guides?" was the answer.

Later in the day, Ahmed told the whole story in detail to the group of officers. The missy sahib had already given them her version of it, and had indeed sung the praises of the young Guide, and asked Captain Daly to reward him handsomely. Daly, however, knew that the proud native of North-west Hindustan is a good deal more sensitive in matters of this kind than the average man of the plains, and while giving Ahmed unstinted praise, he refrained from offering any tangible recompense.

"I am proud to have you in the corps," he said. "The matter will not be forgotten, and when we have finished the march, and have a little time to rest, I will give you a sheep so that you may feast your friends."

Praise from the sahib was reward enough to the men of the Guides. And Sherdil, who had heard the story from Ahmed previously, was envious, and bemoaned his ill-luck in missing the opportunity which had fallen to his friend.

"May water never flow through that accursed nullah!" he cried. "None of us were able to leap it; it took me half-an-hour to get my horse out of it, and the others had to go a great way round about. And then we were recalled, but we returned later and sought you, and found, not you, but a dog of a Hindu lying with a cut in his shoulder, and we finished what you had left undone."

Savagery was in the blood of these men. The butchery of a wounded man gave them no compunction, and Ahmed, who had grown up among them, was as ignorant as they themselves of the chivalry which bids an Englishman spare his beaten foe.

When the evening cool descended, Captain Daly sent the missy sahib under escort to Karnal, where she would be safe under the protection of Mr. Le Bas.

It was the morning of the 9th of June when the Guides reached the camp on the Ridge, two miles north-west of Delhi. They marched in as firm and light as if they had come but a mile instead of thirty. News of their great achievement had been brought in by native couriers, and a vast crowd was assembled to meet these intrepid warriors who had covered five hundred and eighty miles in twenty-two days. As they reached the lines, Ahmed was amazed to see some of the infantry break their ranks and rush up to an English officer distinguished by his very fair hair. They clung to his stirrups, some kissed his hands, others his feet, pressing upon him with such excitement as to cause alarm to some of his fellow-officers.

"What is it?" asked Ahmed of Sherdil.

""Tis that they are pleased to see Hodson Sahib. He was our commander when Lumsden Sahib went over the black water, and we love him. Wah! he is a fighter. See him with the sword: there is no match for him. It is good to see him again."

And then came an opportunity for these hardy warriors to show the stuff of which they were made. Even as they approached the Ridge a staff-officer galloped to meet them, and accosting Captain Daly asked how soon he could be ready for action.

"In half-an-hour," replied the gallant captain.

It happened that since early morning parties of horse and foot had sallied from Delhi to attack the advanced posts of the British. Since attack is ever the best defence, General Barnard ordered his men to move out and drive back the enemy. The Guides went forward at the trumpet call with irresistible dash, and were soon engaged hand to hand with the vastly superior numbers of the mutineers. They carried all before them, but at a heavy price. Lieutenant Battye was shot through the body, and died murmuring "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." Lieutenant Hawes was clipped across the face with a sword, Lieutenant Kennedy was wounded in the arm; and Captain Daly himself, after having his horse killed under him, was struck in the leg by a spent bullet. Many of the men were killed or wounded. But to be in the thick of a fight was as wine to the Guides. Every man burned to uphold the honour of the corps, and though they were saddened by the loss of so many officers and men before they had even pitched their tents, they were conscious of having borne themselves as their loved commander Lumsden Sahib would have wished them to do, and were content.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH

Some Lathi-wallahs and a Camel

One afternoon, about ten days after the arrival of the Guides, an orderly came to Captain Daly's tent, where the captain was sitting on a camp-stool at the door, drinking a cup of tea with Lieutenant Kennedy.

"The general's compliments, sir," said the orderly, saluting, "and will you kindly step over to his tent for a minute or two?"

"Immediately," said Captain Daly. "Orders for to-morrow, I suppose," he added to Kennedy, as he got up to go.

When he entered General Barnard's tent, the general handed him a letter, saying—

"What do you make of that, Daly?"

Daly took the letter, and read, in a sloping angular hand, as follows—

"DEAR GENERAL BARNARD—

"My father is safe. How thankful I am! And I know you will be glad too. Yesterday I received the enclosed note from him; you see it is written on the back of a torn label. He is in Delhi, but does not say where; I suppose he was afraid to write too much in case the chit fell into the hands of the mutineers. The man who brought it knows nothing; perhaps it is that he knows but will not tell. Will you try to find out where my dear father is? Some good friend must be hiding him. I know you have spies in the city, and I should be so happy if you could find out something more about him, and whether he is well, and many, *many* other things. Do help me, there's a good friend.

"Yours sincerely,

"MARY CRADDOCK.

"P.S.—Perhaps that young Guide who saved me from the horrid men would go into the city. He would do *anything* for me, I know."

"Just like a girl," said Daly, handing the letter back.

"Now that's not fair," said the kindly old general. "Wait till you have daughters of your own, Daly. It is good news that Craddock is still alive; his wife, poor woman, was killed as she was escaping. He and I are old friends. D'you know him?"

"No. But the idea is impossible, of course. Without more information it would be like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay. Besides, he's in hiding; no one would have the ghost of a chance of finding him."

"One of his servants may be faithful, and keeping him concealed."

"Yes, but better not set anybody inquiring too closely for Craddock's servants. If those fiends suspect one of them is hiding an Englishman it will be all up with him and his master too."

"Still, Craddock is my friend, and I stood godfather to his girl. Couldn't one of Hodson's spies help us? Or this Guide she mentions—what about him?"

"He's a clever young fellow, no doubt—showed pluck and resource in saving the girl; but I don't know that I should like to send him into that wasps' nest. One of Hodson's spies would run less risk."

"Well, we'll ask Hodson. Poor fellow! He is rather knocked up, I'm afraid."

The general sent an orderly to ask Lieutenant Hodson to visit him, and in a few minutes he appeared. The case was put to him, and he read Mary Craddock's letter.

"All my men are out," he said. "Let's have a look at this man of yours, Daly. Who is he?"

"A Pathan," replied Daly, and related how Ahmed had rescued the girl.

"A likely fellow. Have him up, general."

Ahmed, in company with Sherdil, was eating a mess of rice stewed in a soup of sheep's tail, when a naik of the corps came up and said that the general wished to see him.

"Hai!" said Sherdil, with a sigh. "Now it is coming, Ahmed-ji. Verily thou wilt be a dafadar, or maybe a jamadar, before Sherdil, son of Assad. What must be will be."

Ahmed wondered what the summons to the general's presence could mean. He had had a part in the brushes with the enemy, which had been of daily occurrence since the corps arrived; but he had done nothing to signalize himself. Hodson gave him a quick look as he came up and saluted.

"Your name?" he said in the Pashtu tongue.

"Ahmed, son of Rahmut Khan of Shagpur, sahib," said the boy.

"A good specimen of the breed," said Hodson to the others. "The general wants you to go into the city," he added, speaking again in Ahmed's own language. There was no officer in India more expert than Hodson in the speech of the natives.

"I am ready, sahib," said Ahmed at once.

"You'll have to pretend to be a mutineer, you know."

"With the hazur's pardon I will not do that. There is no need."

"Then how will you go? The khaki would betray you."

"I would go, sahib, as I went with Sherdil, son of Assad, to Mandan, the village of Minghal Khan."

"Ah! and how was that?"

Ahmed told how the company of Afghan traders had entered the village, and about the box containing porcelain from Delhi. He related the story simply, without any of the boastful garniture which comes so readily to an oriental's lips. The officers listened with interest, Hodson keeping his keen blue eyes fixed on the boy's face.

"This is the oddest Pathan I ever came across," he said in English when Ahmed had finished the story. To Ahmed he said, "Then you will go as an Afghan trader? How will you do that? Traders do not go alone."

"If I might have Sherdil, son of Assad, and Rasul Khan, and Dilawur——"

"No, no, that won't do.—He wants half your corps, Daly.—You must go alone."

"As the hazur pleases." He paused, and thought for a minute, the officers watching him. "I will go alone, sahib," he said. "The tale will be that I was one of many, travelling towards Delhi with Persian shawls for the princes' women. And we were set upon by a band of Gujars, and I alone escaped."

"But if you go alone the Gujars may catch you, for of course you cannot go to the city from the Ridge; you must approach as from a distant part."

"It is as the sahib says."

"You will take the risk?"

"If the captain sahib commands."

"Never met so direct a fellow," said Hodson to the others. "My spies have a good deal to say about bakshish, as a rule. Well," he went on in Pashtu, "what will you want?"

"Clothes, shawls, and a camel, sahib."

"And where will you get them?"

"In the bazar at Karnal, sahib."

"Steal them, eh?"

"Buy them with the hazur's rupees," said Ahmed, with a smile.

"And what are you going to do in Delhi?"

"I wait for commands, sahib."

"Can you write?"

"No, sahib."

"Of course not. Then you will be no good to me."

"But with rupees I can pay a munshi, sahib."

"He is our man," said Hodson in English. "He has an answer for everything, and judging by the way he told us his story just now we shan't have so much trouble in sifting his information as we have with Rajab Ali's friends."

Rajab Ali was a one-eyed maulavi, an old friend of Sir Henry Lawrence, whose many connections about the court of Delhi frequently sent Hodson news of what was going on in the city. These communications were sometimes made verbally by trusty messengers, sometimes in writing, on tiny scrolls of the finest paper, two and a quarter inches long by one and a half broad. The writing on them was so minute that the translation when written out filled more than two pages of large letter paper. But the actual information they contained was so scanty, and so much embellished in the manner no oriental can avoid, that the separation of the corn from the chaff gave Hodson a great deal of trouble. Moreover, being written by hangers-on of the court, they included a vast amount of unreliable gossip and hearsay. Hodson welcomed the opportunity of gaining news that might be gleaned among the people themselves. He had reason to believe that a great number of the more respectable inhabitants of Delhi, who had had experience of the benefits of orderly government, deplored the excesses of the sepoys and badmashes of the city, and the disorders that sprang from the weakness of the king. It would be a material gain to the besiegers to learn how far that feeling extended, and how far the normal population would support the hordes of rebels who were constantly pouring into the city.

"You will go among the people," said Hodson to Ahmed, "into the bazars, among the sepoys, and listen to their talk, and find out what they think and what their hearts are. You will learn who comes into the city, and how many they are, and what news they bring from other parts; and you will go to Fazl Hak, a maulavi to whom you will be recommended by Rajab Ali, and make him write all this down, saying no more than the truth, and these letters you will send to me, cunningly concealed, by messengers who will be appointed. Is it understood?"

"Hazur, it is understood."

"And there is something else, but always have in mind that the other comes first. The missy sahib whom you saved from the zamindar has a father in Delhi, but she knows not where. The General Sahib wishes you to learn, if you can, where he is. He is a hakim; Craddock Sahib is his name; and we think that he may have been hidden away by one of his servants. Remember, to ask openly for either the sahib or his servants may be death to them both. If you find the sahib, and see any way by which he may escape to us, well. But do not attempt to bring him away unless it can be done with little fear. He is the father of the missy sahib."

"Even as Rahmut Khan is my father," said Ahmed.

Hodson did not guess the thought that prompted this apparently inconsequent statement. He knew nothing, nor did the other officers, of Rahmut Khan's fate.

"And you must tell none of your comrades of this task we have given you—not even Sherdil, son of Assad, who appears to be your chief friend. I know that Sherdil, he has a moist tongue. Where pots are, there will be a clatter, as they say in your country. You will start——"

Here he was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a bugle. Immediately afterwards an officer galloped up.

"The Pandies are attacking our right rear with two thousand men and six guns, sir," he said.

"By George! that's a new move," said the General. "Off with you, Daly; Grant will want all the help he can get. Not you, Hodson; you're not fit to sit a horse yet. You had better take this young Pathan and settle things with him. I will see you again in the morning."

Thus it was that Ahmed had no part in the fight at Nawabganj—one of the most critical moments of the siege. Under cover of the gardens that dotted the broken ground on the right of the British rear a large body of all arms of the enemy had moved up, taking Sir Hope Grant, who was in command, completely by surprise. He had only the Guides cavalry, a portion of the 9th Lancers, and four guns to meet the attack. As soon as Captain Daly arrived

on the scene, he was detached with two guns under Lieutenant Hills, a troop of Lancers, and the Guides, and found himself faced by a huge mass of infantry and cavalry, with six or eight guns, in his immediate front. There was nothing to fall back upon, so, leaving a handful of Guides to protect the guns, he detached the rest to clear the left flank, already threatened by the enemy's horse. Lieutenant Hills got his guns into action, and the little force was bravely holding its own when Major Tombs hurried up with the remainder of the guns. The mutineers pressed on in swarms, dodging among the trees, and when they observed the weakness of the force opposed to them, and the absence of infantry, they began to close in, until they could pick off Major Tombs' men as they served the guns. There was a danger that the defenders would be overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers.

"I fear I must ask you to charge, to save my guns," said Major Tombs to Daly.

Daly was the only British officer with the cavalry. Waving his sword, he called on his Guides to charge. The little band dashed forward in the gathering mist, cut their way right through the crowd of infantry, and never checked until they reached the enemy's guns. The gunners fled, the infantry was thrown into disorder, and the bold and perilous movement had the effect of clearing the front and allowing time for reinforcements to come up.

A bullet struck Daly in the left shoulder, and he fell from his horse. In the excitement of the charge his plight was unnoticed. Search was made for him when the men were returning, and they could not find him in the dark, until one of the enemy, who had been a jamadar in the 1st Oudh Irregular Cavalry, pointed out his whereabouts. His wound proved so serious as to incapacitate him, and indeed he never recovered the full use of his left arm, so that when Lieutenant Hodson called on the General next day to report the arrangements he had made with Ahmed, he learnt that he was to command the Guides until Daly had recovered.

Next day Ahmed set off for Karnal with a returning convoy. Sherdil was anxious to know what had passed at his interview with the General, still more when he learnt that he was leaving for Karnal. But Ahmed told him

nothing except that he had been entrusted with an errand, and might not see him again for some time.

On arriving at Karnal, Ahmed changed his uniform for the ordinary dress of an Afghan trader, and purchased with money given him by Hodson a number of shawls. He presented to Mr. Le Bas a letter from Hodson explaining his mission, and had an interview with Miss Craddock in that gentleman's house.

She told him no more than he already knew, and when he asked which of her father's servants was most likely to have befriended him she was puzzled to answer.

"We thought them all faithful," she said; "but whom can we trust in these times? They were all good servants; we thought a world of Kaluja Dass, our khansaman; and Sakun, one of our chaprasis, was always ready to run errands for me, even when his work for my father was done."

The girl was delighted that her suggestion to General Barnard had borne fruit, and promised Ahmed much bakshish if he could send her news of her father. And then, having disguised himself by means of a black beard and moustache, Ahmed set off in a day or two on his adventurous mission.

He rode out on a camel, reluctantly leaving his horse, Ruksh, behind. The shawls were strapped in packs before him, and he carried no visible arms except an Afghan knife; but he had a pistol in his outer garment, and a talwar was concealed between the packs on his camel's back. Until he came within twelve miles of Delhi he kept to the great trunk road, on which troops and armed convoys passed so frequently that it was fairly safe for travellers. More than once he was stopped and questioned by parties of soldiers, but the pass given him by Mr. Le Bas satisfied them, and he was allowed to proceed.

He had decided to approach Delhi from the south-west. He struck off, therefore, in the direction of Bahadurgurh, and was within seven miles of his destination when a heavy storm of rain came on, drenching him to the skin. The camel is a beast of most uncertain temper, and in the midst of the storm Ahmed's steed suddenly sank on its knees beneath a large banian-tree that stood solitary by the roadside, tucked its legs under it, and refused to

budge. Ahmed was well acquainted with the ways of camels, and knew that no coercion would make the animal move until it pleased: all that he could do was to wait in patience for its sulky fit to pass. Fortunately it had chosen for its resting-place a spot where the banian-tree afforded some shelter from the rain, and from the sun when the rain ceased. Swampy paddy fields lay on both sides of the road, and muggy steam rose from the ground under the sun's heat, making Ahmed feel very uncomfortable. He tramped up and down for a time, hoping that the camel would rise; but as there was no sign of any change of mood in it, he by and by spread a mat by the animal's side, and squatted on it, leaning against the camel, prepared to make the best of the situation. He ate some of the food he had brought with him, and then, it being midday and hot, he fell asleep. A Pathan sleeps like a rabbit, with only one eye shut, and Ahmed would wake at the slightest sound. If a band of mutineers should come upon him he knew that there was no escape for him, so that whether awake or asleep he would be in the same predicament.

It was late in the afternoon when he awoke. Nothing had disturbed his rest; the animal had not moved. Ahmed got up to try the effect of a little coaxing; it was quite time the camel came to a reasonable frame of mind. As he moved towards the animal's head he noticed a man approaching across the fields. He carried a lathi, and in dress and appearance looked like a ryot. The man stopped short when he caught sight of Ahmed's turban. Apparently he had supposed that the camel lying in the road was untended. Ahmed looked at him and he looked at Ahmed. Then he drew a little nearer and shouted a salutation.

"Salaam, sarban, what is amiss?"

"Not a great matter, stranger," said Ahmed. "The camel does but take a rest."

"Thou hast without doubt come far?"

"That is possible."

"And is it far thou goest?"

"Even to the city of the king."

"Have a care lest thou fall among the Feringhis. What is the news whence thou comest?"

"Nay, thou wilt have news, being so near the city. What is said here, stranger?"

"Why, that Bakht Khan is on his way hither with 50,000 men, and the Shah of Persia has taken Lahore, and Jan Larrens was caught as he sought to escape on an elephant, and all men knew him by the wounds on his back. The accursed Feringhis will soon be altogether destroyed, that is certain."

"If it be Allah's will."

To this the ryot made no reply. He had stood at a distance during the conversation, every man being suspicious of every other in this time of unrest and upheaval. Paying him no further attention, Ahmed went to the camel's head and tried to induce the animal to get up. He did not relish the prospect of remaining all night in the open, liable to be drenched by another rain-storm. But the beast was obstinate. Even when Ahmed offered it the last of his chapatis, its only response was a savage bite at the hand which fed it, a vicious attack that Ahmed only escaped by a hair's breadth. The ryot stood for a few minutes watching these ineffectual attempts, then shouted a farewell and moved away.

Ahmed was annoyed. To an oriental time is nothing; but for the possible inconvenience of the situation he might have been content to wait the animal's pleasure. But he felt that the sooner he was in Delhi the better. And it suddenly occurred to him that his position might prove even more inconvenient than he had hitherto reckoned for. The ryot who had just disappeared had probably returned to his home in some not distant hamlet. He would almost certainly tell the people about the recalcitrant camel, and they might see a chance of helping themselves to its load. One solitary trader, even though an Afghan, would be no match, they would think, for a band of lathi-wallahs. Ahmed wished he had seized the man, and held him at least until the camel had recovered its temper. It was too late to think of that now; the ryot was quite out of sight, and Ahmed had perforce to return to his mat.

In the course of an hour he had reason to wish that the idea of arresting the man had occurred to him sooner. He saw in the distance a group of at least half-a-dozen men approaching, all carrying lathis except one, who had a matchlock. They might, of course, have been induced by mere curiosity to come and see the amusing spectacle of an Afghan baffled by a camel. But belonging himself to a robber tribe, Ahmed suspected that their motive was not so peaceable. Well, they should not despoil him without a fight. They would indeed hardly expect to do so, for, though a trader, he was an Afghan, and if they knew anything of Afghans they would know that he would not yield without offering resistance. But they were six to one!

Fortunately Ahmed had some little protection in the great bulk of the camel and in the banian-tree behind him. While they were still a great way off, he slipped his talwar from its covering, and laid it close to his hand, ready for emergencies. He had, besides, his pistol and his knife. But he felt that he was in an awkward predicament. The matchlock would carry further than his pistol; the man who bore it had only to keep out of range and "pot" him at his leisure. Even if the man missed him, he might hit the camel, and then the animal, if not mortally wounded, would probably rise quickly enough and bolt in an entirely wrong direction. There was just a chance that the man, not suspecting him to bear firearms, might come so near that he would be able to get first shot; that indeed seemed to be his only chance.

He stood behind the camel and watched them. While they were still too far away for the matchlock-bearer to fire with any certainty of hitting him, he shouted—

"Eo! eo! Who are you, and what do you want?"

Like all hill-men, he had a very clear, ringing voice, and the note of authority in his tone caused them to halt. Then one of them called back in answer—

"We have come to help you with your rogue of a camel."

"I want no help," he replied. "The camel will rise when Allah wills. I would not trouble you."

There was silence for a moment, then another voice cried—

"We know not who you are. We want no Afghans here. You must come with us to our village, and our headman shall hear who you are and say what shall be done. It may be that he will send you to the chief of Bahadurgurh."

"What talk is this?" cried Ahmed. "I am a trader, as you see, and I carry my wares to Delhi. What has the chief of Bahadurgurh to say to the king?"

"That we shall see," replied the man truculently, advancing. "It will be better for you to come with us quietly."

"You had better return to your dogs' kennels before you come to harm," cried Ahmed, flourishing his talwar. "As you perceive, I am armed, and I will send you back without arms and legs if you come within my reach."

The men laughed. What was a talwar against a matchlock? The man carrying the firearm came on ahead of the rest, and advancing to within a short distance of Ahmed he set the weapon to his shoulder and proceeded coolly to take aim. This was exactly what Ahmed had calculated upon. The firing of a matchlock was a somewhat lengthy operation, especially to a villager. Before the man had time to fire, Ahmed quickly changed the talwar from his right hand to his left, drew his pistol, and fired over the camel's back. The man dropped without a sound. At the same moment Ahmed flung down his pistol, and taking the sword again in his right hand, drew his knife, vaulted over the animal, and dashed straight at the knot of villagers.

Taken aback by this unexpected stroke from a man they supposed to be helpless, the villagers stood irresolute. Before they had recovered their wits, Ahmed was upon them. The sight of his sword flashing in the glow of the setting sun was too much for most of them; they took to their heels and fled in all haste across the fields. One or two, apparently so paralyzed with consternation that they could not even run, seized their lathis and made feeble attempts to parry the descending talwar. But with a couple of swift strokes Ahmed settled their account. Then, incensed at their unprovoked attack, he made off at full speed after the runaways. They were no match for him in fleetness, and, realizing this, they scattered, howling. Ahmed could not catch them all; he ran after the one whom he recognized as the man that had first discovered him. A pursuit of half-a-mile over the squelching soil brought him within arm's length, and the wretched man paid the penalty.

It would be dangerous to pursue the rest, loath as he was to let any of them go unpunished. And reflecting that as soon as they got back to their village they would without doubt bring others with firearms to deal with him, he saw that he must lose no time in making his escape. The camel must be compelled to move. But when he turned, he saw that the camel, probably startled by the shot, was already on its feet, and shambling along the road in the direction from which he had come. Sprinting after it, he lugged it round until its head was again turned towards Delhi, walked by its side until he picked up the pistol, then leapt to his seat, and set off, as quickly as the clumsy animal would move, towards his destination.

He had not ridden for more than half-a-minute when he reflected that he was not even yet out of danger. If the villagers pursued him, they could easily overtake him before he had gone many miles. Instantly he drove the camel off the road on to the field. When he had gone a hundred paces he stopped, slipped off, and with the quickness of a well-trained scout proceeded to obliterate the traces of the animal's feet back to the point at which it had started to go in the opposite direction, the camel meanwhile stopping to drink at a deep pool. In a few minutes he was back again, remounted, and continued his journey.

It was by this time nearly dark. After riding a few miles he saw, somewhat nearer the road, a small shrine amid trees, such as are to be found in countless numbers dotted over India. It struck him that, since the gates of Delhi must now be shut, he might well shelter for the night beneath the walls of the shrine. He halted, tethered the camel to one of the trees, and made himself as comfortable as he could.

An hour or two afterwards he heard the distant sounds of a body of men approaching. Were they fellow-villagers of the men he had punished, on the hunt for him? Devoutly he hoped that the camel would not betray him by a grunt. The sounds drew nearer—voices, the tramp of feet on the road. They passed. For the time he was safe. Tired as he was, he durst not now go to sleep. The men might return; an unlucky grunt might bring them upon him. In anxious suspense he waited. The hours are long to one who waits. At last he heard faint sounds from beyond him. Men were approaching him again. He stood, grasping his weapons. The sounds grew louder. The marching men were now abreast of him. If they had been his comrades of the Guides

they would find the tracks of his camel even in the dark. But they passed; the sound of their marching grew fainter; and at last Ahmed's uneasiness left him, and, wrapping himself in his cloak, he lay down to sleep.

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

Kaluja Dass, Khansaman

On that evening, about the time when Ahmed had his little fight with the villagers, Kaluja Dass, an Oudh man of pleasant aspect and grave deportment, was preparing a meal for his master in a substantial house lying some little distance in the rear of the Chandni Chauk—Silver Street—the long straight thoroughfare leading from the Lahore gate to the king's palace in Delhi. His brows were drawn down, a deep vertical furrow divided his forehead; he wore a look of worry and embarrassment which accorded ill with his position as khansaman to a subahdar in the army of the king. But the subahdar had announced that he would bring guests home to sup with him, and Kaluja was at his wits' end to provide the meal. The subahdar commanded a regiment, but neither he nor his men had had any pay for weeks. In spite of his impecuniosity, the officer always expected his appetite to be appeased, and was wont to give the rein to a very abusive tongue if the bill of fare was not to his liking.

Kaluja Dass had done his best, but really, without money it was impossible to persuade the merchants in the bazar, however loyal they were, that an officer of the king must be suitably fed. The khansaman had done his best, but he had to confess to himself, as he viewed the dishes, that the supper was not worthy even of a jamadar.

The room in which the meal was set was a large one on the first floor of a house which had once belonged to a prince of the blood. But some years before, when the sahibs came to assist Bahadur Shah—who certainly needed assistance—in the government of his kingdom, the house had been purchased by one of them from its impoverished owner. Craddock Sahib was a hakim, and also, as it appeared, a man of war; in the English way of putting it, he was a surgeon attached to one of the foot regiments in the service of the Company. He had a wife, a son, and a daughter; so large a house was quite unnecessary, as Kaluja thought, for so small a family, especially when the son went away over the black water to his own country,

to learn how to become a hakim like his father. But that was a characteristic of the sahibs: they loved spaciousness; and if Craddock Sahib's family was small, his household was correspondingly large; Kaluja Dass as khansaman ruled over quite a regiment of underlings.

Dr. Craddock had been in cantonments when the rising took place. As soon as news of it reached his ears he mounted his buggy and hastened back into the city, against the advice of all his friends. At the gate he was met by a sepoy, who presented a loaded pistol at his head; but quick as thought the doctor lashed him across the face with his whip, and the man slunk howling away. Seeing that the street was full of people, Dr. Craddock jumped from his buggy and made his way by side streets towards his house. He had almost reached it when he was set upon by a group of ruffians, who hacked at him with their knives and left him for dead on the ground.

It happened that next day the doctor's house was granted by the king to a Pathan adventurer named Minghal Khan, who had just entered the city. He had come with high recommendations from the Maulavi Ahmed Ullah. Had he not earned Paradise by going to and fro through the land in the guise of a fakir and preparing the minds of the faithful for the great deliverance at hand? So worthy a missionary deserved well at the hands of Bahadur Shah, and the doddering old king at once made him a subahdar and gave him for residence the house which had just been purged of the defiling presence of an infidel Feringhi.

The first thing Minghal Khan did was to fling out of the house some of the European furniture, treading under heel the many dainty nick-nacks which had stood for so much to the memsahib as mementoes of home. Among the larger articles of furniture which he allowed to remain was a lofty almirah, on the shelves of which stood long arrays of bottles large and small, containing liquids and powders of various colours. Minghal had no respect for the infidel hakim's drugs, but the bottles made a pretty show and pleased his eye.

Those who had known Kaluja Dass as the faithful servant of Craddock Sahib might have been surprised at his remaining in the same house as khansaman to Minghal Khan. No doubt they were somewhat astonished at the change that came over the man. He was never tired of abusing his late

master and all the Feringhi race, and though, not being a man of war, he did not actually fight against them, no man in Delhi cursed them more heartily or uttered devouter wishes for their extermination. It was partly this violence of language that induced Minghal Khan to engage him. That important personage at first swore that he would have none to serve him who had served the Feringhis; he even accused Kaluja of favouring the accursed infidels, and only the most vehement protestations of hatred—spittings, revilings, maledictions on countless foregone generations of the sons of perdition—prevented the Pathan from dealing with Kaluja in his haste as too many loyal natives had been dealt with. And then, when the man offered to serve the hazur without pay—so greatly did he honour this doughty enemy of the sahibs—Minghal was satisfied. A man must live, to be sure, but a khansaman had opportunities of squeezing the means of livelihood out of the purveyors honoured with his master's custom; and Minghal, being as arrant a brigand as ever went raiding on the border, was content to accept the service of an experienced domestic on such easy terms.

But Kaluja's place was not an easy one, and became more difficult as money ran short. This evening he had spent his last rupee in buying sweetmeats as garnishment for the meal. The names he bestowed inwardly on his master did not savour of respect. And when by and by Minghal came in with two friends of his kidney, and saw the meagreness of the repast, he cursed Kaluja as a dog and the son of a dog, and bade him go into the bazar and buy something more suited to the dignity, as to the appetite, of a friend of Bahadur Shah.

"Hazur, thy servant has not a pice," faltered the khansaman.

"Pig, wouldst thou answer me? Go, get thee some of the Feringhi's lumber that remains, and sell it. Wouldst thou keep my guests waiting? Quick, or by my father's beard I will hamstring thee."

Kaluja hastened from the room. During his absence Minghal inveighed against the parsimony of the king, which kept his faithful servants in such straits.

"Where is justice?" he cried. "Did he not command two days ago that twelve rupees' worth of sweetmeats should be bestowed upon those seventy

sowars who came in from Alipur, with a tale—lies, by my beard!—that they had slain a hundred Feringhis and pursued a host for three full koss? And yesterday did he not give large gifts to the Gujars who stole forty camels from the Feringhis' camp? He is lavish to them, and yet will not part with a rupee to one who has journeyed in the heat of the day and faced death a hundred times in conveying the Maulavi's chapatis to the faithful!"

"The king has no treasury: how can he pay you?" said one of his friends.

"Bah! Has he not untold wealth in that palace of his? And are not the queen's arms heavy with jewels? Verily he will not long be king when we have smitten these accursed Feringhis."

"And when will that be, friend? The smiting was the other way this morning."

"Hai! what is that? Do not our numbers grow day by day? What can the Feringhis do? Can they scale these walls? Have we not a hundred guns and more upon them? Within a little we shall issue forth like a swarm of locusts and devour them. The work grows apace. This day a kasid came with news that a regiment has risen at Jajjar; troops are coming to us from Kotwal; the Feringhis have been smitten at Lahore. What can this handful of white-faced dogs do against our great host?"

Further conversation was interrupted by the return of the khansaman laden with dainties from the bazar.

"Wah! Did I not say that there is abundance of good things in Delhi? But why, pig, hast thou not brought spirits? Wherewithal dost thou suppose we will comfort our hearts?"

"Hazur, the bottles are empty."

"Dog, thou liest! All the Feringhis lay in a plentiful store of the strong waters. Hast thou drunk them thyself, thou thief, and broke the Prophet's command? Verily I will myself come and see if thou art telling the truth."

"Hazur, I will look again," said the khansaman hastily, and with an anxious air. "Maybe I have overlooked a bottle or two that still remain. It is not meet that the noble hazur should have the great trouble of searching himself."

He went away, and soon returned with a full bottle of brandy. Forbidden though the drinking of intoxicating liquors was, many professed faithful followers of the Prophet paid scant heed to the prohibition. They drank if they could afford to buy. Minghal and his guests imbibed freely, diluting the liquor but little. The bottle was soon empty: the guests, less accustomed to the spirit than Minghal himself, were completely overcome; and Minghal, flushed and unsteady, called for more. Kaluja humbly declared that there was no more in the house; but Minghal, cursing him for a liar, cried that he would see for himself. He rose and staggered across the room. Catching sight of the row of bottles on the almirah, he gave a maudlin chuckle of delight and reached out his hand to take one down.

"Hazur, have a care!" cried the khansaman. "Those bottles contain not what thou desirest. They are the hakim's medicines; some cause the pains of hell, some kill."

"Thou liest in thy throat, dog. I will drink, I say."

He took down one of the bottles and carried it to the divan where he had been reclining. Then, removing the stopper, he poured a quantity of liquid into his cup and raised it to his lips. Before he could drink, however, he choked, caught his breath, and dropped the cup as if it stung him. The liquid fell upon his sandalled feet, and he sprang up with a yell of pain.

"I am burning!" he screamed, gasping with the ammonia fumes. "It is the fire of Tophet at my feet and nose."

"Hazur, did I not say to thee, 'Touch not'? But thou wouldst not hear."

"Dog, dost thou prate while I burn? The pain consumes me. Dost thou stand and look? Run for the hakim ere I perish."

The khansaman started, and threw a scared look over his shoulder. Then he appeared to recover himself.

"It needs not to call a hakim," he said. "I will myself ease the hazur's pain."

He took some ghi from a dish, and smeared it quickly on the tortured feet. The grease gave instant relief. Minghal was effectually sobered now, but his

temper must needs find a vent. His rolling eyes lighted on his two guests, who had lain undisturbed in a drunken stupor.

"Carry me those swine to the street!" he cried furiously. "Will they remain here and bring down the wrath of Allah upon me? Fling them out, I say."

Kaluja having reasons of his own for clearing the apartment, caught the men by the heels and dragged them unceremoniously to the door. Then he suggested that the hazur would be the better for a long night's sleep, and assisted his master to his bedroom. When he returned to the other room, he secured both the inner and the outer doors; then, furtively as a thief might move, he went to the almirah. Looking round as if to make sure even now that no one was observing him, he slid a portion of the back of the almirah aside, disclosing the stone wall of the room. He put his hand on one of the slabs of stone: it yielded to his touch, and opened slowly inwards. He stepped in, drew back the panel of the almirah to its former place, and disappeared.

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

Within the Gates

It was still early morning when Ahmed rode up to the red walls of Delhi; but in spite of the hour there was already much traffic through the Ajmir gate. A long line of bullock-carts was filing along the Jaipur road past the garden suburb of Paharganj, conveying country produce into the city. A regiment of sepoys was marching out of the gate towards the encampment lying across the road. To the left of the gate rose the tomb of Ghazi Khan, and in the centre of the city towered the dome and minarets of the Jama Masjid—the splendid mosque which is the Mecca of Mohammedan India. Ahmed was amazed at the vastness of this city of the Moguls. He felt as a Highland lad might feel if suddenly transplanted from his little village among the lochs and mountains to the turmoil of London.

Delhi had none of the aspects of a beleaguered city; indeed, it was never in the military sense besieged. The British force was far too small to attempt a strict investment of the great city. Men might go in and out as they pleased. The holders of the Ridge were far more closely beset. Save that his communications were open in the rear, General Barnard might himself have been considered to be in a state of siege. He was holding his ground, waiting for the opportunity to strike a blow.

Ahmed followed at the tail end of the procession of carts. As he approached the gate he observed a strong guard of armed sepoys there, and wondered whether he would have any difficulty in passing. He felt a little timid now that he was actually drawing near to the heart and focus of the great rebellion, but he crushed down the feeling, and assuming a bold front accosted one of the guard and began in his imperfect Urdu to pour out his tale of tribulation.

"Salaam, jamadar!" he said, giving the man a sausage by way of ingratiation a title at least two grades above his proper rank, and raising his right hand

to his brow in due Moslem salutation; "thou dost behold one who is very thankful to Allah this day."

"Salaam, banijara," said the man. "What is this thou tellest me?"

"Thou beholdest one, a peaceable trader, as thou seest, who has escaped the very jaws of death. I was one of a small caravan bringing rich merchandise for the subahdars of the army of the faithful; nay, maybe for the most noble shadow of Allah the king himself. And lo! we were set upon in the twinkling of an eye by a troop of vile Gujars, sons of perdition, and though we fought like lions—was not Sherdil, the son of Assad, among us?—what could we do? We are not men of the sword, like thee."

"True; the camel is but as a leaf when the tiger springs upon him. Go on with thy tale."

"We were like leaves, as thou sayest, when the wind blows. We were scattered, and I in my haste quitted the road, and by the grace of Allah got myself away among trees and bushes, and so escaped. And I wandered long, and by great good fortune found myself at length upon this very road. 'Twas good fortune indeed, for had we not been molested we might verily have blundered upon the camp of the Feringhis, and then my goods would have come to the hands of vile kafirs instead of true believers. And now that I have found the city of peace, I would fain know of some good serai where men of my folk are wont to resort, so that I may rest somewhat from my journey before I carry my goods to the subahdars and have some recompense for my toils and perils."

He slipped a coin into the man's hand; bakshish would always smooth the way.

"In very truth thou hast been fortunate," said the sepoy; "yet not wholly, for it is no good time for buying and selling in Delhi. We soldiers—even the subahdars, save some few who made great plunder at the first rising—cry out for money, and there is none that hears. Yet thou mayst find some of the princes who will look at thy wares: go in peace."

And he gave Ahmed the names of two or three serais frequented by traders of his nation. Ahmed went on his way rejoicing. He had asked for the Afghan serais merely to avoid them; his imposture might be discovered if

he came among genuine merchants. After a little trouble and discreet inquiries he found a humble inn at the corner of the Moti Bazar, near the centre of the city and not far from the Kotwali—the head-quarters of the city police—and having left his wares and his camel in the charge of the bhatiyara, he sallied out into the thronging streets, to learn somewhat of the immense city in which, as he supposed, his lot was for some time to be cast.

He made his way first to the Chandni Chauk, and was amazed at the shops which lined that thoroughfare. He had seen shops in Peshawar, but none like these. The street was thronged, and the people were talking excitedly in groups. Hovering on the outskirts of one of these he heard the name of Bakht Khan frequently mentioned, and by and by made out that this rebel artillery officer was expected to arrive shortly with a vast host which would sweep all the Feringhis before it. He went on until he reached the palace, and stood for some time watching the streams of people coming and going —officers, court officials, scribes, bankers—all showing signs of the same excitement. Then he passed on by the palace wall until he reached the Calcutta gate, and saw the fort of Selimgarh stretching out into the river, and learnt from a bystander whom he ventured to address that it was by this very route that the first mutineers had ridden in from Meerut; and there, a little to the left, was the Magazine, the scene of Lieutenant Willoughby's great exploit, when, after defending his post with nine companions against a horde of assailants, he at last blew it up rather than let it fall into the hands of the rebels.

When midday came he was tired and hungry, and returned to the serai for a meal. Later in the day, when the heat was past, he unloaded his bales, hired a coolie, and set forth to offer his wares to the Prince Mirza Mogul, subahdar of the volunteer regiment of native infantry, who seemed to be one of the most important persons in the city. But on arriving at the head-quarters of the regiment he found that the prince had gone to attend a darbar at the palace. Some of the subordinate officers, however, were curious to see the contents of the bale he had brought, and he displayed before them the fabrics he had purchased in Karnal with money given him by Hodson Sahib. Many of the officers, in spite of their having received little or no pay from the King of Delhi, were rich with the spoils of looted provincial treasuries, and were quite ready to bargain for the many-coloured shawls whose merits Ahmed extolled with oriental extravagance.

It takes a long time to conclude a bargain in the East, and Ahmed knew enough of the part he was to play to make no attempt to shorten the business. After haggling for an hour or two he allowed the purchasers to buy some of his goods at what they considered very low prices, not forgetting to assure them that he was being absolutely ruined, and but for the disturbance of trade, due to the upheaval, he would not dream of parting with his wares at such low figures. And he told over again the story of his providential escape from the Gujars, and made himself so pleasant that the officers gossiped freely with him about things that were happening—of the regiments that were expected to arrive in the city, the confiscation of the property of Beg Begam Shamen, the shooting of four spies who had been captured in the English camp. Above all, they complained of the stinginess of the miserable old king, who would neither pay them their arrears nor allow them to obtain their just dues by exerting pressure on the shroffs. They talked in very large terms of the wealth they would secure when the Feringhis were finally defeated, and Ahmed went away feeling that at present they had absolute confidence in their ultimate success.

Next day he heard sounds of firing, and learnt by and by that an engagement had taken place with the English at Sabzi Mandi, a suburb at the southern end of the Ridge. Presently a great mob of yelling fanatics rushed into the city with an elephant they had captured from the English, and they led it in triumph to the palace as a present for the king. Ahmed followed in their wake, accompanied by his coolie with a bale. He had learnt that a regiment of sepoys was quartered in temporary barracks close to the palace, and it seemed likely that the officers might be in the mood to become purchasers. On reaching the barracks he found that they had gone to the palace to join in acclaiming the leaders of the force which had that day, according to their own account, done prodigious execution among the enemy. Ahmed was not sorry; while waiting for the return of the officers he would have an opportunity of gleaning a little information from the men. And so, after a little exchange of courtesies, he said—

"Without doubt such fine men as you must have a famous warrior as leader."

"Without doubt, though we know him little yet," was the reply. "He is, at any rate, a fellow-countryman of yours, O banijara, and a very devout

man."

"What! Has he not led you against the Feringhis? Surely in no better way could he prove his devoutness."

"That is very true, and he will lead us when the time comes. There is no doubt of our bravery; we came from Nimuch, and were not admitted to the city until we had covered ourselves with glory in a fight with the English. But our subadhar has only of late been appointed to command us, and since then we have not been outside the walls. We lost very heavily at Badli-ki-serai, the day before those Guides—accursed traitors—came into the English camp. We killed thousands and thousands of the English, but could not utterly defeat them for want of ammunition. And our subahdar was killed. Though our new subahdar has not fought with us yet, he must be a very brave man, or our king would not have appointed him over the heads of other officers who led us."

"It is well you have a subahdar so much to your mind," said Ahmed.

"He is indeed a good man," said another sepoy. "These are hard times, and the great one knows how unjust it is to forbid us to take what we can. He shuts one eye, and if that eye is turned to us when we are taking a little loot—why, Allah is good. In truth"—and here the man dropped his voice—"a part of our loot is set aside, and if it does not find its way to the subahdar, I know not where it goes. 'Twas only yesterday we roasted a rascally shroff until he showed us where his money-bags were hidden. That is as it should be, for the shroffs being vile Hindus, it is not meet that the faithful should want while the unbelievers are waxing fat with great gain. In truth, good banijara, Minghal Khan is a noble officer, and if you do but wait a little, maybe he will buy somewhat of you, seeing that you are of his race."

Ahmed wondered whether he had concealed the start of surprise he felt he had involuntarily given when the name of Minghal Khan was mentioned. That wily enemy of his father was here in Delhi, then, playing a new part. His impulse was to depart at once, lest Minghal should return and discover him. His disguise, to be sure, was good: it was hardly likely that any one who knew Ahmed the boy would recognize him in the bearded trader—and Ahmed found the beard, fixed on with a kind of glue, decidedly uncomfortable. But Minghal was an adept at disguises himself, as his

appearance at Mardan as a fakir proved; and if he heard this supposed trader's voice, Ahmed feared that he was lost.

As ill-luck would have it, before he could decently break off his conversation and take his departure, a jamadar of the regiment returned, and, seeing the bundle, demanded that it should be opened. There was no help for it; Ahmed had to display his wares, and was immediately engaged in a haggling bout. Being thoroughly uneasy, he determined to cut the business short, and indeed concluded a bargain with a rapidity and at a sacrifice that evidently surprised his customer. Ahmed hastened to assure him that at an ordinary time he would rather starve than accept such a price, but what was a poor trader to do in these times of trouble? He must take what he could get and be thankful.

The natural result of this was that the customer hesitated. Perhaps if he haggled a little longer he would get the article—a fine embroidered shawl—still cheaper. But Ahmed now spoke up resolutely.

"No, I must make sacrifices; it is fate; but I will not give my goods away. Here, Ali, the hazur does not want the shawl. Roll it up in the bundle; we will be gone."

And then the jamadar, fearing he might lose his bargain after all, closed with the offer, and paid the price.

It was only just in time. The coolie was actually rolling up the bundle when Minghal Khan himself, accompanied by two or three subordinate officers, turned the corner, and approached the door of the barracks at which the chaffering had been going on. Ahmed instinctively bent down, in spite of his disguise, to avoid recognition, and helped the man to tie up the bundle. One of the sepoys with whom he had been in conversation nudged him.

"That is our noble subahdar," he said in a whisper.

Ahmed made but a slight sign that he heard. He did not venture to look up until Minghal Khan had passed by. Then he said—

"Without doubt he is a very devout man, but does he seem fit to command such fine warriors as you? Truly he has not the figure of a great commander. Nevertheless the king knows best."

"And will you not show him your goods?"

"Another time. The great man talked very earnestly with his friends. It is certain he is occupied with weighty matters. It would not beseem my insignificance to intrude upon him now. Salaam!"

He went back to the serai and dismissed the coolie. He had had enough of playing the trader for that time. The rest of the day he spent in wandering about the city, haunting the gates, noting the strength of the sepoys at the bastions, and picking up what scraps of information he could.

That night, under cover of the darkness, he sought out the house of the Maulavi Fazl Hak, who, while in high favour with the king, was secretly in the confidence of Rajab Ali Khan, the organizer of Hodson's spies. It was to him that Ahmed was to make his reports, and by him that the means of conveying his information to the British lines would be arranged. He was admitted to the presence of the maulavi, a man of dignified aspect, with eyes of particular brilliance. Fazl Hak was convinced from the first that the cause of the mutineers was hopeless, and advised the king many times during the siege to make his peace with the sahibs before it was too late.

"I am Ahmed Khan," said the visitor, after salutations had been exchanged, "and I bring greeting from the Maulavi Rajab Ali."

"Yes. You came in yesterday by the Ajmir gate."

"True," said Ahmed, somewhat surprised.

"And you took up your abode in the serai of Gopal Ali by the Moti Bazar."

"It is so," said Ahmed, wondering more and more.

"And you have sold goods to officers of the regiments of the Prince Mirza Mogul and Minghal Khan."

"All this is true," said Ahmed, feeling strangely uncomfortable; "and yet I know not how it reached your ears."

"That is no matter. It is my business to know things. And now, what can I do for you?"

"I would send a message to Hodson Sahib."

"Well, I have been asked to assist an Afghan trader named Ahmed Khan. That was Rajab Ali's word. I will do all I can. Say on. What is the message?"

"I must say it to a munshi, who will write with a pen what I speak with my lips."

"I will write. Speak."

Then Ahmed began, in the grave and earnest manner of one engaged in an important transaction, to describe what he had seen, and relate what he had heard. For some little while Fazl Hak wrote with the finest of pens, in diminutive characters, on paper so thin that Ahmed marvelled it was not pierced. The maulavi's grave face expressed nothing of what he thought; perhaps one who knew him better might have detected a slight twinkle beneath his veiling eyelids, and the play of his lips behind their curtain of beard. All at once he stopped writing, and looking up at Ahmed, said—

"Does a man cook eggs that are already eaten? This that you say, Ahmed Khan, is a twice-told tale. The oldest of your news went to the English three days ago; the newest, a little ere the gates were shut."

Ahmed flushed, and looked exceedingly abashed. He was chagrined at his failure, and annoyed that Fazl Hak had let him go on even so long dictating his stale news. Something in the maulavi's manner suggested that he was not wholly pleased at Ahmed's presence in Delhi. Perhaps he thought that his friend Rajab Ali might have consulted him before sending a new and untried spy into the city. And if this was indeed his feeling, how well, thought Ahmed, was it justified? Was this man omniscient, that nothing could escape him? Ahmed felt thoroughly disheartened. What could he do? He would only make himself foolish in the eyes of the sahibs if he sent them old news, even as he had already made himself foolish in the eyes of Fazl Hak.

"Go on," said the maulavi. "Let me write some new news."

"Of what use, O wise one? It were but waste of breath."

"Yet go on. Who can tell but that the wind may have carried one little seed to your ear?"

"A man was hanged to-day on a tree before the Kotwali, it being supposed he was concerned in the making of a mine that was discovered by the Kashmir gate."

"And a man in the garb of a fakir," said the maulavi, as if in continuance of the report, "was seized at the Ajmir gate, and it being suspected that he was a spy, he was killed. Go on."

"Bakht Khan with his force from Bareilly has halted at the tomb of Safdar Jang."

"That was yesterday. He is now at Ghaziabad. Go on."

"I will even go to my place, and trouble you no more until I have learnt somewhat that no one else can know. Is it not vain to pour water into a vessel that is already full?"

And then Fazl Hak laid down his pen and smiled. It was as though he was satisfied with having impressed Ahmed with a sense of his knowledge and of his own insignificance.

"Come, let us talk as friends," he said. "You are but a youth in these things, in spite of your beard." ("He does not know of my disguise, then," thought Ahmed; this was a little cheering.) "And for one who is but beginning you have not done amiss. I perceive that you have a quick eye and a ready ear, and if, when these troubles are over, you care to enter my service, without doubt you will in due time become the possessor of many rupees."

"I thank you," said Ahmed, the sting of his humiliation somewhat mollified; "but when I have found the hakim I shall return to my own place."

"The hakim! What is this about a hakim?"

The maulavi's evident surprise pleased Ahmed: here was something else that he did not know.

"I came not only to learn things about the rebels," he said, "but to discover the whereabouts of an English hakim who is concealed somewhere in the

city—Craddock Sahib; maybe you know somewhat of him?"

"It was told me that he was slain. How know you that he is yet alive?"

"A chit was carried from him to his daughter in Karnal; therefore am I here."

"I knew it not, and it is good knowledge, for Craddock Sahib is a good hakim, and cured me of a fever."

"Then you will help me to find him?"

"That I cannot do; I have too much to do otherwise, and further, it might bring me into great peril. Already I run great risks. Is it not known who carried the chit?"

"A man who would say nothing, if indeed he knew anything. The missy sahib thought that her father might have been saved by one of his servants: the khansaman, Kaluja Dass, seemed to be a true servant. Know you aught of him?"

"No. I know much, as you have perceived, but I do not know the whereabouts of every khansaman who served the English before the troubles. But I can soon discover."

He clapped his hands, and a chaprasi appeared. The maulavi gave him a few instructions in a low tone, and the man went out again.

"He will assuredly learn what we desire to know. Until he returns refresh yourself. There are sherbets at your service, also a hookah."

Ahmed took the sherbets, but declined the hookah. In the course of an hour the man came back, and spoke apart with his master. Then he disappeared.

"It is vain," said Fazl Hak. "The khansaman has become a rebel. He serves Minghal Khan, who now occupies Craddock Sahib's house. The khansaman, Kaluja Dass, is heard daily cursing the sahibs whom formerly he served, and verily he hates them above measure, or he would not have taken service with Minghal Khan. You must seek elsewhere for the preserver of the hakim. And if you find him, let me know; I would do somewhat for Craddock Sahib."

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH

The Coming of Bakht Khan

Ahmed left the house doubly disappointed—at his failure to supply any information worth carrying to the Ridge, and at the bad news concerning the khansaman. He had been full of confidence when he entered Fazl Hak's presence. His confidence had been rudely shaken, and further, he had now a certain feeling of personal insecurity which he had not before. Not that he had been unaware of the risks that he was running. If his disguise were penetrated, if his connection with the English was so much as suspected, he would be hanged or shot without mercy. But his peril had not come home to him as it did now, when he found that, so far from being unknown in Delhi, his every movement had been watched. If he was thus known to the maulavi, was it not possible that he was also being spied upon by agents of the mutineers? Might they not be giving him the rope by which to hang himself? As he passed through the streets on the way back to his serai he felt that he was slinking along like a criminal. He seemed to see an enemy in every passer-by.

But before he reached the serai he had partially got the better of this feeling. After all, Fazl Hak himself appeared to have no idea that the bearded Afghan who had stood before him was a youth in disguise. It was a pleasure to find a gap in that wise person's knowledge, and as for the mutineers, the summary manner in which they had disposed of the man caught at the Kashmir gate, and the disguised fakir at the Ajmir gate, disposed him to believe that if he were suspected he would not now be alive.

Though thus gaining reassurance as to his safety, he had to confess that the discovery of Craddock Sahib seemed as far off as ever. He had counted much on the khansaman, and to find that the man was not only disloyal, but had actually taken service with one of the most malignant of the enemies of the sahibs, was much more than a disappointment. Since it appeared clear that the khansaman could have had no hand in the concealment of the doctor, he had no clue to follow, and to seek a hidden man without a clue in

this immense city, with its labyrinths of streets and lanes, was a task that staggered him by its hopelessness.

After a night's rest, however, his fit of black despair had passed. He awoke with a settled determination to do his utmost, not merely to find the hakim, but to prove to Fazl Hak and to Hodson Sahib that he was worthy of the mission entrusted to him. In his interview with the maulavi his self-esteem had received a wound—not a very serious one, as his good sense informed him, but still one that could only be healed by accomplishment. The question was, how to achieve his end? Obviously he could not force things; it seemed as though the most he could do was to be alert and vigilant, trusting that chance would throw an opportunity in his way.

It occurred to him that a visit to Minghal Khan's house might help him a little. It would at least enable him to learn for himself, perhaps, whether the chaprasi's report about the khansaman was justified. He still felt a lingering hope that the informant was mistaken. The missy sahib had much knowledge of the man, and it seemed incredible to Ahmed, with his experience of the loyalty of his comrades in the Guides to their salt, that a man who had served the sahib faithfully for years should be so utterly perverted as the chaprasi had reported. Had he not heard stories in camp of the heroic devotion shown by native servants in rescuing and giving asylum to the families whose salt they had eaten? Had he not, indeed, seen with his own eyes in the camp on the Ridge Metcalfe Sahib, who had been saved, not even by a servant, but by a police officer, one Mainudin Hassan Khan, who at the risk of his life had conveyed the sahib to Jajjar? If a police officer would do this, might not a khansaman or some other servant, bound to his master by personal ties far closer, have done as much for Craddock Sahib?

From his experiences on the previous day, he guessed that in all probability Minghal Khan would leave his house early to attend the usual morning darbar at the palace. His absence would furnish a good opportunity of calling without risk. Accordingly, he summoned his coolie, and, while the man was preparing a bale of goods, he inquired of the innkeeper the way to the great man's house. It was not far off, being on the opposite side of the Chandni Chauk towards the Delhi Bank. He set off with his goods, found the house without difficulty, and rang the bell.

"Salaam, darwan," he said to the servant who opened the door. "You behold a trader from Afghanistan, who comes with some beautiful fabrics of exquisite workmanship to lay before the great subahdar, Minghal Khan."

"Away, banijara!" replied the man. "The great one is not at home; he is gone to the king's palace. And even were he within, dost think he would deign to look at the filthy rags a man like thee would bring? Away, and take thy shadow from his door."

Ahmed, who knew very well what this meant, slipped a few annas into the darwan's hand.

"I know I am unworthy that the light of the great man's countenance should fall upon my goods," he said. "Yet in his merciful kindness he may deign to purchase some small thing, and then, O darwan, there will assuredly be dasturi for hands that so well deserve it."

The preliminary "tip," and the promise of a commission on the goods sold, had the expected effect.

"The great one is from home," said the man. "If you will come again, I will do my poor best to persuade him to look upon you."

"It is a favour. How lucky art thou, O darwan, to be doorkeeper to the exalted one! By what great merits didst thou arrive at so high a station?"

The darwan's vanity was flattered. He bridled.

"Wah! It is as thou sayest, banijara. And 'tis more merit than luck, be sure. I have served the great man but two days, and live in the sunlight of his good favour. I have served other great men in my time. Even but now I came from the Maulavi Ahmed Ullah himself. Being ignorant, thou mayst not know that the Maulavi and my present master are as brothers, and two days ago I came from the Maulavi with news of the great doings at Cawnpore. And being the first—for those twenty sowars who brought the news were laggards compared with me—and sent by the Maulavi to Minghal Khan, the great man was able to acquaint the king before the sowars came, and for that he received a present of royal sweetmeats, and made me his darwan."

"Truly it was great merit. And that matter of the doings at Cawnpore—I have heard some whispers of it, but not as thou couldst tell it. I pray thee, darwan, say on."

"It was a glorious matter. The Feringhis were shut up there, and Dhundu Pant, whom men commonly call Nana Sahib, took a full revenge for his grievances. Thou must know he was adopted son of that Baji Rao whom the accursed Feringhis put down from being peshwa, and tried to soothe with a pension of eight lakhs of rupees. And when he died, they would not pay the pension to his son, though Baji Rao left a host of dependants for Nana Sahib to support. And when Nana made complaint of this injustice to the Kumpani, they gave him a rough answer: what did it matter to the Kumpani if Baji Rao's people starved? And when the rising came, the men of those parts made Nana Sahib their leader, and he caused entrenchments to be thrown up before Cawnpore, and mounted great guns to destroy the Feringhis. They had done well to yield, but they are even as pigs, and endured great tribulations from shot and shell and the want of food, and Nana Sahib was wroth, because the men clamoured to be led to Delhi. Nana Sahib is a very great man. He sent a letter to the Feringhis, in which he promised, if they would lay down their arms, to let them go safely to Allahabad. Wah! They are stupid as camels. They sent men to meet Azimullah, Nana Sahib's munshi, and he promised to have forty boats stored with food ready for them at the Satia Chama ghat, and it was written down, and when one of the Feringhis came to see Nana Sahib put his name to the paper, the Nana shed tears of sorrow at what their women and children had suffered. Truly he is a very great man."

"As a serpent in cunning. Go on with thy tale, darwan."

"The Feringhis came out, and laughed with joy when they saw the boats moored, even as it had been written. They got into the boats, and some two or three began to move on the stream, when at the sound of a bugle the boatmen leapt overboard, and the sepoys on the banks fired at those laughing fools, and all the men were killed; it was a great killing; and the women were dragged ashore and pent up in a little house, and there they are to this day, and when the Feringhis are all destroyed, then there will be white-faced wives for any who like to take them. It was a great day—and for me too. I shall by and by be rich as a shroff, that is sure. I got much

plunder when we entered Cawnpore after the Feringhis were slain; and in very truth—but tell no man of this, banijara—it would not surprise me if I were at this moment richer than my exalted master himself. There is great honour in serving the King of Delhi, but hitherto little profit. That is only until the Feringhis are utterly destroyed. Then all faithful servants of the king will become great subahdars, and Minghal Khan is very high in his favour. But now there is little money; indeed, our khansaman had yesterday none wherewith to buy food for the great one, until he had sold some of the things in the house that belonged to the dog of an English hakim who used to live here. He is a good man, the khansaman, and it would do your ears good to hear him curse the vile Feringhis."

"The great one has many servants, no doubt?" said Ahmed.

"Nay, it is not so. Besides me and Kaluja Dass, the khansaman, there is but one khitmutgar,—a household by no means worthy of so great a man as Minghal Khan. But what must be will be. When there is little money, even the greatest must go short. Here is the khansaman himself, going to market in the bazar."

He stood aside to let the upper servant pass. Ahmed looked at the man keenly. He saw an elderly man, with a grave and somewhat anxious countenance. The khansaman glanced at him as he passed.

"A banijara from Afghanistan, khansaman," said the darwan. "Think you the exalted one will be in the mind to purchase somewhat of him?"

"In the mind, but not the pocket, until the thrice-accursed sons of perdition are sent to the lowest pit," replied the khansaman, and passed on.

"Thou hearest?" said the darwan. "Without doubt he is a good man, and when Minghal Khan is exalted, Kaluja Dass will be exalted too. He hates the Feringhis with a terrible hatred, and that is easy to understand, seeing that it was his kismet to serve them for so many years."

"It is as thou sayest, good darwan. But it seems 'tis an ill time to bring my wares. Yet I would fain show them to the exalted one at a convenient season. I will come again, and if it should not please the great man to see me, I should have some consolation in another talk with thee. 'Tis not often a poor trader like me meets a man who has seen such great deeds."

"And done them, banijara. Was I not among those who shot the fools of Feringhis at the ghat? Wah! One boat that had left the ghat was rowed to the other side—the pigs of English believed they might yet escape. But I was there, with my musket, and I fired, and my shot kindled the thatch that covered the boat, and it burnt with a great blaze. And the boat grounded in the mud, and I ran down and pulled out of it one of the English by the hair of his head, and drove my knife into him many times, and he died, pig that he was—though he did not squeal like a pig; the English, curse them, never squeal."

Ahmed's blood was boiling. It was one of his own race whom this braggart menial had killed. He would have liked to end the man's account then and there, but the coolie was at hand, squatting beside the bale of goods. For the sake of his mission he could not afford to give rein to his anger.

"It is an honour to meet one who has done such brave deeds," he said. "Thou wert better among the soldiers, surely, than at the door of a house. It is men like thee who are wanted to fight the Feringhis, not those miserable dogs who went out but lately, horse and foot and guns, and returned saying that they had not fought because the air did not agree with them. The king did right to drive them from the city. I will come again, good darwan, at night-time perhaps, when the work is done; far be it from me to interfere with thy important duties, and maybe if I bring some sweetmeats or preserves—delicate things for the palate—thou wilt deign to partake with me, while thou cheerest me with thy pleasant talk."

"Gladly will I meet thee," said the darwan, greatly pleased with this flattery. "Never have I seen so excellent a banijara. Salaam!"

Ahmed departed with his coolie. When they reached the Chandni Chauk it was instantly apparent that something had happened which stirred public excitement. Crowds were pouring towards the palace, Hindus and Mohammedans together, their faces lit with joy. One man jostled the coolie, and his burden was thrown to the ground.

"Pig of a Purbiya!" cried Ahmed, seizing the man—a Pathan could not overlook such an insult—"what meanest thou to damage thus the goods of thy betters?"

"How shall I answer?" replied the man. "Knowest thou not that Bakht Khan with his troops is now on the river-bank yonder, and but waits for the repairing of the bridge to cross? And the king has ordered four hundred men to do that work, and I am even now hastening to do his bidding. Overlook my fault for this time, I pray thee."

Ahmed gave him a kick and released him. Clearly there was little chance of doing business on such a great day. He took his wares back to the serai, and then set off to the Calcutta gate to see what might be seen. As he went he heard the concussion of artillery fire, and men soon came running in the direction of the palace with news that the English were bombarding the battery north of the Kashmir gate, commanded by Kuli Khan. Cries arose that a general assault was being prepared against the city, and by and by thousands of red-coated sepoys, with lumbering gun-carriages, marched through the streets towards the Kabul gate, to take up their position at Idgah and Dam-damma, facing the southern end of the Ridge. Meanwhile the bridge of boats, which had broken down in a heavy wind-storm on the previous day, was being hastily repaired by a host of coolies with two companies of sappers and miners, and across the river, two or three miles away, lay the long-expected force of Mohammed Bakht Khan, from whose arrival the rebels hoped so much. All day the city was in a ferment. Heavy guns were mounted on the batteries; some attempt was made to reply to the English fire; and great was the jubilation when it was reported that shells from the city had fallen in the midst of the English camp, killing hundreds of the accursed Feringhis.

Amid the excitements of the day Ahmed had no leisure to prosecute his direct inquiries. He was satisfied with having made a friend of Minghal Khan's doorkeeper, whom he intended to cultivate. What the darwan had said of Kaluja Dass, and the words he had himself heard fall from the khansaman's lips, confirmed the report of Fazl Hak's emissary, and Ahmed now felt sure that Craddock Sahib, wherever he was, owed nothing to his former servant. He could not conceive what his next move should be, and if great fighting was to ensue upon Bakht Khan's arrival, it would seem that nothing but mere accident could put him on the traces of the sahib. Meanwhile he went to Fazl Hak with the news of the treachery at Cawnpore; the particulars he had learnt from the darwan were new to the maulavi.

Next day the whole city flocked to see the entrance of the Bareilly force over the renovated bridge. Ahmed stood among the crowd as the troops filed by, headed by Bakht Khan, who rode among a group of all the chief officers in the city, sent to meet him by the king. There were four regiments of foot, seven hundred cavalry, six horse artillery guns, three field-pieces, three hundred spare horses, and fourteen elephants laden with treasure worth, as rumour said, four lakhs of rupees. Ahmed followed the troops to the great square before the mosque, and listened to the extravagant speeches made there in welcome of the arrivals. Bakht Khan himself was a bluff, blunt soldier, who had learnt something of English reticence during his long and brilliant service with the sahibs. His battery of artillery had received a mural crown as honorary decoration for its guns in reward for its good work at Jalalabad in the first Afghan war. He said little in reply to the flowery compliments showered upon him by the king's officers, and Minghal Khan, who was present with the rest, appeared to think the new-comer's speech deficient in encouragement. It was too good an opportunity to be lost. Minghal raised his voice and poured out streams of fiery eloquence, denouncing the Feringhis, and boasting of what should be done to them now that more active measures were about to be taken. The excited mob yelled applause, even those who failed to understand his speech, which was delivered in the vile jargon of a hill-man; and Ahmed, taking note of all, saw that his old enemy had beyond doubt the ear of the rebels.

The sepoys stood to their arms while Bakht Khan and the other chief officers went to the palace to see the king. Ahmed waited patiently amid the throng until the great man returned. All voices were hushed as Bakht Khan announced that the king had grasped his hands and appointed him commander-in-chief of the forces.

"The king commands that the English shall cease to exist," said the general. "He has given me a shield and a sword, and shed the light of his countenance upon me. He has appointed the Kalla Mahall as the quarters for my troops from Bareilly, and ordered four thousand rupees to be distributed among you for a merry-making. And now I give orders that no soldier shall plunder or harm any man whatsoever in this city. If any soldier is caught plundering, his arm shall be severed from his body. Thus the king commands. We can do nothing without order, such order as the Feringhis have; and there is no order where every man seeks to enrich himself. I said

to the king that were I to catch even a prince of blood in the act of plunder, I would straightway cut off his nose and ears. And the king made answer: 'Do whatsoever seemeth good unto thee.' Wherefore I say to the kotwal of this city: if there is any more plundering he shall be hanged. And let a drummer go forth and proclaim that all shopkeepers arm themselves, and if any have no arms, they shall be furnished him. These things I say, and let all men know that I am the general of Bahadur Shah, and my word is as his word."

There was a soldierly directness and a grim determination about the man that impressed the people. Ahmed recognized the fruits of English training in the general, but as he looked round among the sepoys and the populace, and realized what discordant elements were mingled there, he knew that one man, even such a one as Bakht Khan, could never discipline them into the cohesion which alone could command success.

When the assembly dispersed and the troops went to their quarters, Ahmed still kept track of the movements of the general. He followed him when he visited Prince Mirza Mogul, the former commander-in-chief, sulking at his reduction to the post of adjutant-general, and when he inspected the magazine, and waited for hours at the general's door when he held his levée of the officers, taking note of those who entered, and those who remained longest. Minghal Khan was among these last, and since it was clear that he and the commander-in-chief were on especially good terms, Ahmed decided that it would certainly be worth while to pay another visit to the darwan. As yet he had learnt little that all the world did not know; but it was possible that the men of Minghal Khan's own household might have information of a more private nature. It was now drawing towards evening; the business of the day would soon cease, and the darwan would be at leisure. In preparation for the visit Ahmed bought a quantity of delectables in the bazar, and as soon as it was dark, and the streets, which had been thronged all day, became a little clearer, he set off with his parcel of dainties for Minghal Khan's house.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH

The Doctor's Divan

"Salaam, darwan," said Ahmed, as the man opened the gate in answer to his ring. "Thou beholdest me, even as I said, and I have with me some few choice things to eat. Peradventure thy duties are done, and thou wilt have leisure to enliven my ears with more tales of brave doings."

"Woe is me, banijara! I would fain talk to thee and eat thy dainties, but I fear me 'tis an ill season. My exalted master is even at this moment above-stairs in council with Bakht Khan himself, and he may call for me at any moment."

"That is ill news for me, good darwan. I must needs go back and come another day. And yet it is pity, for these dainties of mine are fresh. Hai! what must be will be."

'"Tis pity, as thou sayest; but the exalted one might be displeased."

The darwan was clearly vexed at the prospect of losing a feast. Ahmed, on his part, was the more desirous of gaining admittance to the house now that he knew what was going on there. Perhaps this was the very opportunity he had been seeking, of learning something about the rebels' plans that should escape even Fazl Hak. So he took quick advantage of the darwan's hesitation.

"Maybe I might come in for a short time," he said. "Never would I interfere with thy duties, and if thou art summoned I can take up my shoes and depart quietly. And I mind me of a saying of my country: 'Better sheep's trotters now than a leg of mutton a year hence.'"

"A true saying, and a wise. Well, come in, banijara. Allah is good!"

Ahmed entered, and the darwan led him to his own little shed in the compound; and, making themselves as comfortable as the bare chamber admitted, they began to talk in low tones, and to dispose of the eatables

which Ahmed had brought. If the darwan had been observant, he would have noticed that his companion was scarcely so attentive to his conversation as he had been on the previous day. Indeed, Ahmed's imagination was busy all the time with the meeting upstairs. What was being discussed between the commander-in-chief and Minghal Khan? How would he find out? He wished that the darwan would be called away, so that he might make an attempt to look in upon them and, if possible, to hear something of what they were saying. In view of the possibility, he got from the darwan by discreet questions a description of the apartments.

"The great ones are in the room where the English hakim—may his father's grave be defiled!—took his meals. Opposite is the room where he kept his medicines. And the khitmutgar told me of a strange happening. A little while ago the exalted one, being athirst—he had drunk of the Feringhi's strong liquor, but that must not be told—being athirst, I say, he took one of the hakim's bottles, thinking it contained a grateful draught. But lo! when he lifted the stopper, straightway he was bitten by terrible devils that caught him by the nose and throat, and some of the liquor was spilt upon his foot and smote him with very lively pains. And now he goes but rarely into that room, and he sniffs even at milk before he tastes it."

Time passed; the materials of the feast had disappeared; and the darwan, at length becoming alive to the apparent tedium of his guest, heartily wished that he would go. He threw out hints—the hour was getting late; the early sleep was best. Ahmed feigned obtuseness; he was determined not to go while there was any chance of gaining his end. But he had almost given up hope when the darwan was at last summoned to attend his master. Ahmed at once rose.

"It would be ill to stay longer, good darwan," he said. "I will even let myself out and close the door behind me when I know that the way is clear."

"Do as thou sayest, and God be with thee," replied the darwan, hastening away. Ahmed at once slipped out and opened the gate a little way, to give the impression that he had gone and forgotten in his haste to close it behind him. Then he ran into the house, and had just hidden behind a long curtain in the hall when he heard the darwan's voice addressing some one as he descended the stairs.

"The exalted one calleth for drinks, khansaman," he said. "He bade me tell thee as I passed, for he sends me an errand, and the khitmutgar also. What an evil is the lack of money! Here am I, a darwan, bid to do chaprasis' work! Well, thou, khansaman, must turn darwan while we are gone. I go to summon the illustrious prince, Mirza Mogul, to attend the general. Have good care of the door."

He was evidently in very ill-humour at having to turn out. It was raining; he growled again as he went out into the street, glancing in at his shed as he passed to see whether his visitor was gone. Ahmed heard the khansaman close the door, and then pass by into the kitchen to fetch the drinks. Instantly he slipped out, and ran lightly up the staircase to the first floor. The wide landing was lit by two lamps hanging from the ceiling. Right and left were two doors, the one on the right slightly ajar, the one on the left wide open. Looking through this latter, Ahmed saw the medicine-room of which the darwan had spoken; the bottles stood in array on the shelves of a large almirah. From the other door came the sound of voices: it was here that Minghal Khan and his guest were conversing. Ahmed was resolved to learn the subject of their discourse. It was probably of importance; almost certainly it was concerned with military affairs, for the darwan had gone to summon the adjutant-general. To learn the matter of their deliberations might be of vital moment to the English. Yet how was he to do so? He could not listen at the door; the servants might pass at any moment. Even as he stood in a tremor of excitement, he heard the clinking of drinking-vessels from below; the khansaman was returning. To hide from him was his first concern. At the other end of the landing was a passage; he might take refuge there. Yet, ignorant of that part of the house, he might only run into greater danger. There was no time for calculation. In another moment he would be seen, and then his fate was sealed. He slipped into the surgery, and stood behind the door, hoping that the khansaman, after carrying the drinks to his master, would not enter the room opposite. If he did—Ahmed fingered his knife: a Pathan has a short way with his enemies.

He heard the khansaman go into the dining-room with his clinking vessels. Voices; then silence; then the shuffling feet of the khansaman as he went downstairs again. Had he shut the door behind him? If he had, all hope of hearing the conversation in that room was gone. Ahmed peeped out. The door was fast closed. He slipped out stealthily, crossed the landing, and put

his ear against the door. The sound of talking came to him muffled and indistinct. But it seemed to be approaching: were the great men coming from the room? He heard a laugh, and in Minghal's loud tones the word "almirah." Instantly it occurred to him that the bringing of the liquors had reminded Minghal of his mishap, and he was about to show his guest the room in which it had happened, and the almirah from which he had taken the fatal bottle. In a flash Ahmed saw a chance of taking advantage of their temporary absence from the dining-room. No longer hesitating, he ran to the dark passage at the end of the landing, and shrank into a corner until the two men had crossed from room to room. Then he stole back on tiptoe, and peeped round the door of the surgery to make sure that he could not be seen as he entered the room opposite. The men had their backs to him; Minghal was pointing out the bottle which had all but killed him. Ahmed slipped into the dining-room, and looked around for some means of concealment. He had but a moment; if he did not discover a suitable hiding-place he must get back to the dark passage before Minghal Khan returned.

The eyes of the Guides were trained to observe quickly. This is what he saw in an instant of time: at one end of the room, a pianoforte—he had seen such in the officers' quarters at Hoti-Mardan; in one corner a number of European chairs pushed back out of the way; in the centre, four cushioned seats grouped about a little foot-table on which were cups and bottles and the remains of a meal; along the wall at right-angles to the door, a wide low divan, with flounces touching the floor. In a moment he made his deductions and took his resolution. Two of the four cushioned seats had been occupied by Minghal Khan and the general; the other two were for the officers whom the darwan and the khitmutgar had gone to summon. The divan probably would not be used; beneath it, screened by the flounce, he might lie and hear all that was said. If other officers came, and the divan were required, it would be pulled out and rolled across the floor. In that case he must crawl with it. The chances of discovery by the officers were slight; there was greater risk of discovery by the servants when the meeting broke up; but the Guides were accustomed to take risks.

These considerations passed through Ahmed's mind in a flash. A few seconds after he entered the room he was under the divan, with the flounce pulled down, not a movement of it to betray that anything had happened during the men's absence. He wondered whether the beating of his heart

could be heard; it was thumping much more violently now than when he was deciding what to do. The officers stayed in the surgery some time; Ahmed heard Minghal Khan talking and laughing; and by the time they came back his pulse had quietened.

They returned to their seats, and drank, and talked—of the weaknesses of the king, the vices of the princes, the temper of the queen, the desperate straits of the English at Lucknow, the glorious future before them when the English had been annihilated. Ahmed wondered whether all the risks he had dared were to be rewarded with no better pribble-prabble than this. But by and by the Mirza Mogul was announced, and a few minutes after him Khuda Baksh Khan, one of the chief sirdars of the rebel forces, and then the conversation took a turn which engaged the listener's attention to the uttermost.

At first he had difficulty in making it out. The speakers referred to matters which had previously been discussed at the king's palace. But gradually he was able to piece things together; allusions became clear; he grasped the whole. That very night, a brigade of four thousand men, horse, foot and artillery, was to march out secretly, slip by the right of the British position, and move on to the village of Alipur, several miles in the rear. The villagers had proved loyal to the British; they constantly supplied the camp with provisions; and General Barnard had recently established there a small post of some sixty Sikhs. The first object of the proposed night attack was to destroy the village with its guard, and carry off a great amount of stores which was believed to be there.

But it had a second object. While the attention of the British was diverted to this movement, twenty thousand men were to parade under arms at dawn near the mosque, in readiness for a sortie. Bakht Khan meant to signalize his elevation to the post of commander-in-chief by a tremendous stroke against the besiegers. The men would issue in two great columns from the Kashmir and Lahore gates. Outnumbering their enemy by nearly four to one, they would overwhelm them.

This was the general scheme. About the details the officers proceeded to wrangle. Mirza Mogul resented the promotion of a mere artillery officer to the chief command, and had innumerable objections to urge against the

views of Bakht Khan. Minghal sided with his superior; Khuda Baksh with the prince. Ahmed could not forbear smiling as he listened. What would all their boasts of a glorious victory come to, if they were thus disunited? He felt a certain respect for Bakht Khan, the sturdy plain-spoken warrior who believed in drill; for the prince, who had bragged for a month of what he meant to do, and had done nothing, he had only contempt. But the important matter was, how to convey information of these designs to Hodson Sahib? The gates of the city had long been shut; to pass out by one of them would be impossible. Should he go to Fazl Hak and ask his advice? He dismissed that idea at once; he would do without Fazl Hak; the maulavi should learn that he was not indispensable. He must trust to his own wits. First of all he had to get safely from the house, and that might prove difficult and dangerous enough. He was a prisoner under the divan until the meeting broke up; when the visitors had gone the door would be bolted; Ahmed began to feel alarmed lest he should have to remain all night in the house, and be prevented from giving the sahibs warning.

Some time elapsed before the three officers rose to depart. Minghal Khan accompanied them to the door; Ahmed heard the bolts shot, the voice of Minghal giving the servants orders for the morning, then the shuffling of his feet as he ascended the staircase and passed along the passage to his bedroom. Presently the khansaman came in, lifted the remains of the repast from the table, put out the light, and went away. Ahmed lifted the edge of the flounce to watch him. From his position he could see across the landing, through the door which the khansaman had left open, into the opposite room, where a lamp still burned. He saw the khansaman cross the room with the tray in his hand and set it down on one of the shelves of the almirah. Then a strange thing happened. The khansaman pushed aside a panel in the back of the almirah where there were no shelves, and the wall behind opened inwards, as of itself. He went into the hole, turned round and replaced the panel, and was shut from view.

What did this mean? What was the explanation of the stealthy, furtive manner in which the khansaman had acted? Ahmed would have liked to follow him; it crossed his mind that the man might have a secret hoard of valuables belonging to his late master; but the urgency of his duty to Hodson Sahib forbade any delay. He was in a quandary. How was he to get out of the house? He had heard the bolt of the front door shot; it was too

much to hope that he could descend the stairs, draw back the bolt, and open the door without attracting the attention of the darwan, whose shed was close by, and who might not yet be asleep. There was no doubt a back entrance; could he discover that without making a noise? This seemed the only course.

He crept from his hiding-place, stole to the door, listened: all was silent. Then he tiptoed along the landing until he came to the dark passage at the end. It ran across the breadth of the house. He went along it, past a closed door which might be the door of Minghal Khan's bedroom, and reached a staircase. Without doubt this would bring him to the back door. He went down, passed the kitchens, which were in darkness, and came to a door which a rapid inspection assured him was neither bolted nor locked. Opening it just enough to allow him to squeeze through, he gently closed it behind him, and found himself in a walled-in garden, with a circular fountain in the middle. A colonnade ran along three sides of it, supported on slender pillars. There was a door on the fourth side, but this he soon proved to be securely locked. It was an easy matter to swarm up one of the pillars, climb the roof of the colonnade, and from that gain the top of the wall a little below. Then dropping on the outer side he alighted in a narrow lane. It was pitch dark; he could not see his way, and knew not whether to turn to the right hand or to the left; but choosing the left at random, he groped his way along, through puddles and heaps of ill-smelling refuse, following the erratic windings of the lane until he came, as he had hoped, to the street in which the house was situated. Here he got a little light from a few smoky oil-lamps that hung at irregular intervals from brackets on the walls. From the sounds he heard before him he guessed that the street led into the Chandni Chauk, and in less than a minute he came to that thoroughfare. There were many people about; though the gates of the city were shut, the hour was not yet late; and he judged from the laughter proceeding from many half-open doors that some of Bakht Khan's soldiers were being entertained by the residents.

He walked slowly, and no one paid him any attention. Should he go at once to the walls, he asked himself, and try to find some way of quitting the city? He bethought himself of his goods in the serai. If he left them, without any word of explanation, the bhatiyara might become suspicious. Even if that gave rise to no immediate danger, he thought it unwise to make any

difficulties for himself when he should return to the city, as no doubt he would do. So he went back to the serai, and told the keeper that he had met an old acquaintance (which happened to be literally true), and proposed to spend the night with him at the other end of the city. But it would be a pity to disturb his bales at this time of night; he might safely leave them in his friend the bhatiyara's care.

"It is understood that you will make some little charge for the storage," he said, "and I know I leave them with an honest man."

"True, O banijara: I will gladly keep them for you: and as to a charge for storage, I can without doubt trust to your sense of justice."

In reality the honest innkeeper reflected that in these troublous times there was always a chance that a stray bullet, or a round shot from the Feringhis' batteries, might end his customer's career—an unfortunate matter for the customer, but likely to be very profitable to himself, with the goods left on his hands. This being satisfactorily arranged, Ahmed dismissed his coolie, ordered a meal, and while he ate it pondered the difficult problem—his escape from the city.

There were batteries at intervals along the wall, from the Water bastion on the extreme north to the Ajmir gate at the south-west corner of the city. These would be fully manned during the night. The wall would be watched along its whole circumference; more loosely on the south side, no doubt, than on the north or west, for in that quarter the city had not even remotely been threatened by the besiegers. On the other hand, the sentries there being in no danger of shot or shell, would have nothing to do but watch, whereas on the west and north, and particularly on the latter, they would be in some degree concerned in keeping under cover. Further, if he left the city on the south side he would have a very long way to go before he could arrive at the Ridge, or at any of the British outposts, and there was also a chance that he might fall into the hands of the rebels as he passed through the populous suburbs. These were strongly held by the mutineers, especially Kishenganj, which would be directly in his path.

On the whole he decided that it would be best to make an attempt at the north side, somewhere between the Shah bastion and the Kashmir gate. He would have to let himself down over the wall, twenty-four feet deep, into

the ditch, ascend the scarp on the opposite side, and gain the glacis; then there would be nothing but a stretch of jungly country between himself and the Ridge.

The first requisite was a rope. He had this ready in the cords by which he bound his merchandise to the camel. But to what could he attach the rope if he gained the wall safely? At any spot sufficiently quiet and secluded for him to make the attempt there was scarcely likely to be anything in the way of a staple or ring. Clearly he must provide himself with something that would serve his purpose in case of necessity. Taking advantage of his nightly visit to the stable to look after his camel, he got a stout lathi and sharpened the end of it into the form of a stake. Then he prepared a slip-knot at the end of the rope, wound the rope about his body under his outer garment, and, returning to the inn, gave his host a courteous "salaam aleikam!" and set off in the direction of the Kashmir gate.

He passed through the Koriapul bazar, which was filled with a motley throng of people of the trading classes, eagerly discussing the events of the day and the strong measures likely to follow upon the arrival of Bakht Khan. Ahmed ventured to delay for a few minutes in order to get an inkling of the general feeling of the people. Many were as confident of the ultimate success of the rebels as the sepoys themselves; but some of the older men, while as fervently desiring the crushing of the English as the rest, quietly dropped in words of caution and doubt. One of them said that he had heard from a servant of Ahsanullah, the king's physician, that that crafty old fox had foretold the doom of the city, and was suspected to be making provision for that fatal day.

Ahmed passed on. But instead of striking into the Nasirganj Road, which would bring him direct to the Kashmir gate and the main guard, he made his way by quiet and tortuous lanes, among the gardens of some of the principal residents, towards a point about half-way between the Kashmir gate and the Mori bastion. He was aware that, besides the heavy guns at the bastions, there were light guns along the whole of this part of the wall; but these could only be effectively used if the besiegers approached the city, and were, perhaps, hardly likely to be manned in force now. But when he came near enough to see them, he saw also that the gunners were on duty beside the guns, huddled together—the night was damp and chilly—and most of them, to all appearance, asleep. Now and then, however, he heard voices from these little knots of men; it behoved him to go warily. He passed along, keeping in shadow, until he reached a part of the wall where all was quiet. There was no firing either from the British lines or from the defences of the city, and the night was so still, with the brooding stillness of an imminent storm, that the slightest sound in his vicinity would have reached his ear. Pausing for a few moments for reassurance, he at length ventured to creep to the foot of the wall, and grope his way up the steps leading to the battlements, eight feet below the parapet. Half-way up he heard a faint call somewhere to his left, but it was not answered, and he went on till he gained the top.

Stealing along the battlements, he sought for some fissure in which he might plant his lathi. But he found none, and the masonry of the wall was far too hard to allow him to bore a hole in it without making a noise that

was bound to attract attention. He wished he could have gone to one of the embrasures and tied his rope to the gun itself; but even if the gunners were asleep, it involved a risk he dared not run. He was at his wit's end to know what to do. Flat on his belly, to lessen the chances of being seen, he crawled along, seeking for a hole, and becoming more and more anxious as the moments fled. What if his warning should reach Hodson Sahib too late? The parapet was loopholed for musketry, but the loopholes afforded him no assistance. At length, when almost in despair, he came to a spot where a shot from one of the British guns had made a jagged rent in the parapet. Here, surely, at this fortuitous embrasure, he could put his fortune to the test. Gently unwinding the rope from about his body, he fixed the slip-knot on the lathi, and having laid this transversely across the gap, he paid out the rope until he felt it touch bottom.

Now came the critical moment. He knew that as soon as he attempted to cross the parapet there was a danger that, dark as the night was, his form might be seen. There was a gun with its group of gunners not many yards to his right. If one of the men should chance to look in his direction he could hardly escape discovery. He was thankful that the sky was overcast; indeed, his journey promised to be an uncomfortable one, for big spots of rain were falling. Perhaps these heralds of a storm might cause the gunners to huddle themselves more closely in their cloaks. But it was vain to delay; the sooner he made the attempt the better; so, one hand holding the rope, with the other he got a grip of the top of the parapet. Then he gave a sudden spring, gained the top, and grasping the rope with both hands, let himself swing free.

As he did so, there came a shout, followed by the sound of scurrying footsteps. His knuckles scraped against the wall; to protect his hands he pushed against the wall with his feet, but the result of this was to throw all his weight on his hands, and his palms were skinned as he slid rapidly down. The descent was only twenty-four feet. He touched the ground. Letting the rope go, he plunged down the scarp into the ditch, rushed across, up the counter-scarp and the glacis, and reached level ground on the other side. Then a shot flew over his head; he had been seen. Upright he would form a target, however indistinct, for the sepoys on the wall, and some of them were no mean marksmen. He dropped on hands and toes, and thus crawled as fast as he could over the soppy ground. Shots flew around him, but he escaped them all, and hurrying along until he judged that he

could no longer be seen, he rose to his feet and ran at full speed across the Circular Road that encompasses the city, over a stretch of open ground, until he reached the Kudsia Road, and did not check his pace until he had got half-a-mile from the wall. And then the rain came down in a blinding torrent, and in five minutes he was drenched to the skin.

The rain favoured him in one respect—that it would keep people under cover. On the other hand, it added to the difficulties of his journey. Even on a clear night he would have found it by no means easy to find his way. He had nearly two miles to go before he could reach the British lines, and the ground was dotted with scrub and trees, and with houses and enclosures, some isolated, some clustered together. Some of the houses had been occupied before the rising by British officers and civil servants; they were now, he did not doubt, in the hands of the rebels. But his only course was to hurry forward, trusting to the good fortune that had hitherto befriended him.

For half-a-mile he went on across the swampy ground, then found himself among the walled enclosures. The best way to avoid observation was to find a lane, such as commonly divided one enclosure from another, and proceed along that. This he did, and for perhaps another quarter of a mile trudged on between high walls, the lane winding this way and that, but leading always, so far as he could judge, in the direction he wished to go. At length he found himself on open ground again, and now had some inkling of his locality. The building he had just passed was a large one, which he had seen, as he thought, often from the Ridge. He would very soon find himself on the gentle slope leading up to the British lines, and his journey would be ended.

He had not gone very far, however, when, even in the darkness, he thought he saw the forms of a number of men recumbent on the ground a little in front of him. He halted and crouched down. They might be the bodies of men killed in some outpost skirmish, but it was well to make sure. A moment later he heard whispers. The men were certainly alive. Were they rebels or a reconnoitring party from the British lines? There were adventurous sahibs, he knew, who would take advantage of just such a night as this to examine the outposts of the enemy. He listened intently, but for some time could not form any conclusion—the voices were too low. At length, however, he saw one of the men rise, and at the same time heard a

voice uttering execrations on the accursed mlechas. Beyond doubt the men were rebels. He must make a circuit, and try to pass them on their flank; then, having got in front of them, trust to his heels.

It was clear from their low tones that they were in some fear of being discovered. A British outpost could not be far distant. He glanced to right and left, then, with the instinct of a scout, backwards along the path by which he had come. And now he received a sudden shock, for, scarcely more than fifty yards from him, there were five or six dark forms creeping towards him. In a moment he realized the situation. Without doubt these men formed part of a rebel outpost stationed in the building he had just passed. They had seen him pass, and with native quickness had recognized that his turban, the most conspicuous part of his dress, was not that of a sepoy. The presence of any other man at that place and hour was suspicious; he might be a spy returning to the British lines. The slow movements of the men indicated that they thought to take him by surprise, without alarming the British outpost by the sounds of a struggle.

They had seen him halt, and would know that he had caught sight of their comrades in advance. At any moment they might rush upon him. He felt that he was in a very tight place. Before and behind were enemies; and these latter, seeming to have anticipated his meditated flank movement, were spreading out as if to envelop him. What could he do? To attempt a dash through the men in front, who had clearly not yet seen him, would be too risky. There were more than a dozen men in the two parties, and he could not hope to escape all their shots if they fired. He had but a moment to decide, and in that moment he remembered the trick by which he had escaped a somewhat similar peril when he was escorting the missy sahib. With a quick movement he divested himself of the turban and the chogah which betrayed him as a trader; then, bending low and crouching forward, he gave a slight cry to attract the attention of the men in front. Before they were all on their feet he was in their midst, and murmuring "Feringhis!" pointed to the party stalking him behind, then sank to the ground as if wounded or exhausted.

His ruse had the effect he had calculated upon. Many a time in the course of the great struggle the mere hint that the sahibs were upon them sufficed to throw panic into the mutineers' hearts. A moment's reflection would have

shown these men that they could scarcely have been taken in reverse unwarned by their comrades in the house. But the suddenness of the stranger's arrival, the darkness, the silence of the approaching forms, combined to banish reason: without a moment's hesitation they took to their heels, and scampered for safety away to the left in the direction of Sabzi Mandi. Instantly Ahmed jumped to his feet and set off at a headlong run towards the British lines. He had not gone more than a hundred yards when he toppled over the edge of a nullah and went souse into the muddy pool at the bottom. As he ran, he heard sounds of conflict behind him. Apparently the men he had startled had dashed heedlessly into those of their comrades who were stealing round on the left. But the noise was almost immediately hushed: the mistake had no doubt been discovered, and the rebels did not wish to bring the Feringhis down upon them.

Dripping wet, bruised, and shaken, Ahmed groped his way along the nullah for some distance, then scrambled up the bank. But in his relief at escaping from the enemy he forgot his usual caution, and did not wait to prospect the ground before leaving the nullah. He had gone but a few paces, still running, when he heard a cry, "Who goes there?" Next moment he tumbled over a man, fell with a thud against another, and while struggling with rough hands laid upon him, realized that he had fallen plump into a British outpost.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH

The Spoilers Spoiled

"Give the word, you heathen son of a washer-woman," said a rough English voice, the owner of which had his hands on Ahmed's throat. "Give the word; jaldi karo."

"What have you got there, Tom?" said another voice.

"Blowed if it ain't a Pandy or some other drowned rat by the feel of him. What do you mean, you suar ka bachcha, by treading on the toes of a British rifleman? Hilo mat, you bloomin' reptile, or I'll stick my bay'net in your gala."

"Take me to Hodson Sahib," said Ahmed in halting English, as soon as he got his breath.

"Hodson Sahib be jiggered! We ain't khaki, as you might see with your cat's eyes; we're green, we are. You've come to the wrong shop for those everlasting Guides, if that's what you want. You've got gentlemen of the 60th Royal Rifles to deal with, let me tell you. He ain't got no rifle, mates, so there ain't no harm in him. What are you a-doing of here, and what was that there noise we heard just now?"

"Take me to Hodson Sahib," Ahmed repeated.

"Perhaps he's one of Hodson's spies, Tom," said a third man. "Better send him along to the Colonel."

"We can't send him, not having no conveniences for such. He'll just have to wait until we're relieved."

"But s'pose he's got news of an attack? There'd be a bit of a dust-up if the General didn't get warning in time."

"And there'd be another dust-up if an inspection-officer come along and found me absent from my juty. Rum thing, juty, you nigger; and the sooner you learn it the better. My juty says one thing, your juty,—if so be you *are* one of Hodson's spies—says another. If two juties pulls in hopposite directions, the thing that wants doing don't get done, and the consekinces is accordin'."

"Y' ought to bin a parson, Tom. Blest if ever I knowed such a chap for argyfying."

"Argyfy! I never do it. I only talk sense. That's what my mother used to say to the old man when they was talkin' over some little bit o' difference between 'em. 'Woman,' says he, 'your argyment's ridik'lous. Women ain't got no power of reasonin'.' 'And a good thing for you, Jimmy,' say she. 'Women ha' got sense.' And then they'd begin over again, and me eatin' bread and butter listenin' to 'em. 'The amount o' rubbidge that there poor boy do have to listen to from one as ought to bring him up proper!' says my father. 'True,' says she, 'and if he didn't take after me 'twould turn his little stomick, poor lamb!' And then he'd argyfy that too much butter warn't good for a boy's innards, and she'd listen and say nothing till the next slice was cut, and blest if he didn't lay it on thicker than her. Argyfyin' ain't in it against sense."

Ahmed was growing impatient under the rifleman's garrulity, though he took a certain pleasure in hearing his mother tongue again. The name "Jimmy" had caught his ear, and he remembered that he had himself been called by that name in those distant years of childhood that seemed like existence in another world. But meanwhile the night was passing; his news was yet untold; and he was meditating a flight from these English soldiers when he heard the tread of men marching, and in a few moments there came up a lieutenant going the rounds with a squad to see that the men of the outposts and pickets were attending to their duty.

"Who's this, sergeant?" said the lieutenant, observing Ahmed. "You know the rules: no visitors allowed?"

"Yes, sir, and he ain't exactly a visitor, that is we didn't invite him and didn't know he was coming; in fact, he came on us all of a heap like, and nearly knocked the breath out o' my body by falling right on top of me, sir. He

asked for Hodson Sahib, sir, and I was just explaining that he'd come to the wrong shop."

"Brought khabar, eh?" said the lieutenant. "Take him to Mr. Hodson," he added, turning to one of his men, and Ahmed was forthwith conveyed along the Ridge until he reached his commander's tent. Hodson was in bed, but on hearing that a native had asked for him, he had Ahmed brought into the tent.

"Who are you?" he said, not recognizing his trooper in the bearded man before him.

"I am Ahmed Khan, sahib, and I come from Delhi with news."

"By Jove!" cried Hodson, "your get-up is first-rate." Then he laughed. "You are no doubt the man Fazl Hak wrote about; a simple trader, he said, who was no good at all for our job. Well, what have you got to say?"

He listened attentively as Ahmed told his story.

As his manner was, he questioned and cross-questioned him searchingly; it was no easy matter, as a rule, to sift out the bare truth from the natives' reports; but Ahmed's account was so simple and direct that he was speedily satisfied, and then he got up, and flinging on a long military cloak, went off to tell General Barnard in person what he had learnt.

"You are wet through," he said before he went, noticing Ahmed's bedraggled appearance. "My servant will give you some dry things. Go and get some sleep, and come to me in the morning."

"If there is to be fighting, and the hazur pleases," said Ahmed, "I should like to go with the Guides."

"Very well," said Hodson, giving him a keen look; "but don't put on the uniform. You are going to be useful, I think, and the secret had better be kept a little longer."

It was half-past two in the morning when a little force, consisting of three hundred and fifty men of the 61st Regiment, Hodson with the cavalry of the Guides, and Major Coke with some batteries of horse artillery, left camp to do battle with the mutineers and prevent if possible the attack on Alipur; if

not, to intercept the rebels on their return. The force was under the command of Coke, of the Panjab Irregular Cavalry, who had arrived on the Ridge a few days before. He was a gallant officer, with a great reputation for his achievements in border warfare; no better man could have been chosen for the work in hand.

Alipur was eight miles distant on the Karnal Road. While Lieutenant Frederick Roberts with the infantry felt for the enemy along the road, Hodson with the Guides and Coke with the guns marched along the right bank of the Jumna Canal. Fortunately the rain had ceased, but the ground had been turned into a quagmire; the horses trod over their fetlocks in mud, and the progress of the column was slow. It was soon clear that all hope must be abandoned of saving the village and the little Sikh post guarding it. Still, the rebels must return to Delhi, and it was possible to relieve them of any plunder they had gained and to teach them a lesson.

The Guides marched on in the darkness. Ahmed had as yet attracted no attention among the troopers. Hodson's servant had rummaged out an old scarf which rolled up into a quite respectable turban, and a discarded great-coat which was not unlike the chogah he had left on the ground when escaping from the rebels. It was impossible to distinguish his dress in the night, and if anything strange had been noticed about his appearance, the fact that many had had to change their drenched garments might have sufficiently explained it. He took care to keep out of Sherdil's way; Sherdil was the most likely man to see through his disguise, and while his mission in Delhi was yet unfulfilled in its entirety, it was advisable to keep the secret.

Soon after daybreak the patrols came in sight of the enemy returning in triumph from Alipur. They had fallen on the village, slain the Sikhs to a man, burnt the place to the ground, and carried off a quantity of plunder, including an ammunition wagon and several camel-loads of small-arm cartridges.

At the sight of the rebel infantry in their red coats, Major Coke unlimbered the guns and brought them into action. They were only light field-pieces, and did little execution among the enemy, who, instead of standing their ground and making use of their overwhelming numbers, fell into a panic

when the guns came within six hundred yards of them, and bolted, flinging away their shoes, belts and other impedimenta, in their mad haste to get away.

Then Hodson gave his eager men the word to charge. They swept down upon the disordered ranks of the rebels, and were soon engaged hand to hand with their cavalry. Shouting their war-cry "Wah-hah!" the Guides cut their way through them, smiting right and left with their swords.

Hodson himself was in the thick of the fray, and escaped hurt as by a miracle. His gallant horse, Feroza, was slashed with sabre cuts; his bridle was severed, and a piece of his glove was shorn off. The men were no whit behind their leader. Ahmed unhorsed one man with his lance, and recovered from the stroke just in time to ward off a desperate thrust from a sabre. The trooper at his side fell from his horse with a mortal wound in his neck; several of the horses were so badly wounded that they had to be killed. But the enemy would not stand, and the Guides' losses were only the one man killed and six wounded.

So desperate was the rebels' flight that they left behind them all their baggage and the spoil of their night's work at Alipur. Hodson would fain have pursued them to the very walls of Delhi, but the horses were so fatigued by their march over the heavy ground that they were incapable of further efforts. Major Coke's guns, moreover, sank so deep into the mud that they could scarcely be moved. The rebels were on higher ground, and the Guides howled with disappointment when they saw them drawing their guns away in safety. They came up with the tail-end of the infantry ere the morning was past, and inflicted heavy loss upon them, so that Bakht Khan, who had led the column in person, had little satisfaction in his night's adventure. All that his five thousand men had accomplished was the destruction of a small village, and the capture of plunder which they were now forced to leave behind them on the field.

The encounter with the enemy having taken place between the road and the canal, the British infantry could not come up in time to take part in it. But they were so much exhausted by the scorching heat of the day, following their march over the swamps, that many of the 61st sank down beneath

trees as they returned to camp, and remained there until elephants were sent to bring them in.

As the Guides marched back to camp, Ahmed became the object of much curious speculation on the part of his comrades. Many had noticed the doughty way in which he had conducted himself during the brief encounter, and wondered who this bearded warrior was who fought among them in a garb so strange. He rode on gravely, not turning his head, nor taking part in the talk of the others. They questioned one another in low tones about him.

"Who is this stranger, and when did he come among us?" asked Rasul Khan, of Sherdil, son of Assad, as they rode a little behind him.

"Allah knows," replied Sherdil. "I know him not. I spoke of him to Hodson Sahib, and the sahib glared at me out of his blue eyes—eyes like a hawk's, Rasul—and asked me whether he was not a good fighter and worthy of the Guides. 'Verily he is, sahib,' I said, 'but we know him not.' '*I* know him, is not that enough?' says the sahib. Peradventure he is a new recruit, Rasul, or a candidate, and there being no time for the tests the sahib bade him come with us and show what he could do. I care not, so that he does not become a dafadar before me."

"I will even ask his name," returned Rasul, riding his horse beside Ahmed's. "Thou of the black beard, what is thy name?"

"I am of the Guides," said Ahmed simply. "If thou desirest to know more, ask of the sahib."

Whereupon Rasul fell back and told Sherdil that the black-bearded one was either a very surly fellow or one of the sahibs in disguise. "For he spake to me in the tone the sahibs have when they bid us do things and we obey even as children. Of a truth he is a sahib, or at the very least a sowar from one of the English regiments. That is it, he is an English sowar, one of Blunt Sahib's men, perhaps, and his own clothes being wet he put on those of a banijara. If that be not the truth, Sherdil, we shall without doubt learn the truth when we come to camp. He is a good fighter, that is sure."

That evening Hodson sent for Ahmed, who in common with all the members of Coke's wearied force had slept through the day, and kept him for a long time. Ahmed felt afterwards as if he had been turned inside out.

He related all that had happened to him since his departure from the Ridge; his fight with the lathi-wallahs, his interview with Fazl Hak (at which Hodson chuckled), his eavesdropping in Minghal Khan's house, the failure of all his attempts hitherto to discover anything about Dr. Craddock. He mentioned casually how he had seen the khansaman disappear through a hole in the wall.

"The rascal!" said Hodson. "Without doubt he has some little hoard of his own by which he sleeps. And you say that he talks foully about the sahibs?"

"True, hazur."

"I hope the villain will get his deserts some day. Craddock Sahib will without doubt be found—if he is yet alive—in some quiet garden or on some roof-top. You will go back into the city. I am pleased with you. You will find out all you can that will help us when the assault comes—the numbers of rebels at the various gates, the haunts of the ringleaders, the secret ways by which they may try to escape. And if you can discover anything of their plans again, as you have done, you must let me know. Have you money?"

"Enough, sahib, and I have still some goods to sell."

"Ah, I had forgotten your goods. I doubt whether you will find them as you left them."

"Then the bhatiyara will suffer many pangs," said Ahmed simply, and Hodson laughed.

It was many days, however, before Ahmed returned to Delhi. His exposure on the night of his escape, followed by the march and fighting, and the fatigues of returning in the heat, had brought on a slight fever. He lay up in the quarters of the camp-followers, trusting to Nature for his cure. And during these days he heard much talk of the incidents of the camp. Cholera had broken out; General Barnard himself died of it after a few hours' illness on the day after the sortie to Alipur. His successor, General Reed, was in ill-health, and officers and men were discussing who would really lead them. Many of the natives complained bitterly of their treatment by the British soldiers. The cook-boys, who carried their food, often had to dodge round shot from the city, and had become expert at it, dropping down on their

knees when they saw the shot coming. And when they rose and went on with their pots and tins the men would jeer at them, and curse them for being late with the food. Ahmed, as he heard things like this, wondered whether all the sahibs had such contempt for their poor native servants.

Between nine and ten one morning the bugles sounded the alarm, and Ahmed, having recovered sufficiently to leave his charpoy, went out to see what was happening. He had heard the sounds of firing so often while lying sick that he would hardly have noticed it now but that it seemed so much nearer than ever before.

In the drizzling rain a party of cavalry was seen approaching a battery near the churchyard. One of the gunners had a portfire lighted in readiness for firing his gun, but Lieutenant Hills ordered him to refrain, judging from the horsemen's movements that they were a picket of the 9th Irregular Native Cavalry. All at once, however, it struck him that the picket was unusually large, and being now a little suspicious, he ordered his men to unlimber and open upon the horsemen. Before this could be done some fifteen or twenty of the enemy dashed over the canal bridge into the camp and rode straight for the guns.

Lieutenant Hills—he was a second lieutenant and a little fellow—saw that time must be gained for his men if the guns were to be saved. Without a moment's hesitation he charged the rebels single-handed, cut down the first man he met, and had just flung his pistol at a second when two sowars dashed upon him. Their horses collided with his in a terrific shock; the horse was rolled over, and Hills sent flying to the ground, thus escaping the swords of the enemy, one of which, however, shore a slice off his jacket. Half stunned, he lay still, and the rebel sowars left him for dead.

But Hills was not dead; in a minute or two he rose to his feet and looked about for his sword. There it was, on the ground about ten yards away. No sooner was it in his hand than three of the enemy returned—two on horseback, the third on foot. One of the horsemen charged him, but he leapt aside and dealt the man a blow that toppled him wounded from the saddle. The second man made full at him with his lance. Hills parried the thrust with a quick movement, and wounded the sowar in the head. Then up came the third man—a young, limber fellow. Hills was panting for breath after

the violence of his exertions. In his fierce and rapid movements his cloak had in some way wound itself about his throat, so that he was almost suffocated. But after dealing with the horseman he stood to meet the last of his opponents, and as he came within reach aimed a shrewd blow at him with his sword. The new-comer was fresh and unwearied. He turned the stroke, seized Hills' sword by the hilt and wrenched it from his grasp. Thus left weaponless, a man might not be blamed if he took to flight. Not so Hills. He had neither sword nor pistol, but he had his fists, and he set upon the rebel with ardour, punching his head and face with such swift and vigorous blows that the man was quite unable to use his sword, and gave back. Unluckily, Hills slipped over his cloak on the sodden ground and fell flat. The rebel had just lifted his sword to cleave the fallen man's skull, when up galloped Major Tombs, his troop-captain, who had heard of the rebels' attack from a trooper of the Irregular Cavalry. In an instant he saw Hills' danger. He was still some thirty paces away, and before he could reach the spot the fatal blow would have been struck. Checking his horse, he rested his revolver on his left arm and took aim at the mutineer, shooting him through the body.

Major Tombs and the Lieutenant returned to their men, who had chased the rebels some little distance past the guns. Coming back by and by to secure the unlimbered gun, they saw another mutineer coolly walking off with the pistol which Hills had hurled at a rebel's head early in the fight. Hills closed with him: the man was a clever swordsman, and for a time it was a fencing-match between them. Then Hills rushed in with a thrust; the rebel jumped aside and dealt Hills a cut on the head that stretched him on the ground. Once more Major Tombs came to the rescue, and ended the matter with his sword.

This incident was the talk of the camp, and Ahmed, who had seen it all, learnt by and by that the officers were to be recommended for the Victoria Cross. He had never heard of this, and inquired what it was.

"Oh," said the bhisti to whom he put the question, "'tis a little brown cross that the great Memsahib over the black water pins to the dhoti of a soldier who is very brave."

"And is it given only to the sahibs, or to us folks of the country as well?"

"That I know not. I never heard of any one but a Feringhi getting it. But why dost ask! Dost think that thou, who art but a banijara, art brave enough to please the great Memsahib?"

"What I think matters nothing, O bhisti. But there are brave men everywhere, even among bhistis."

And Ahmed had now a new goal at which to aim.

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH

Asadullah

Bahadur Shah, King of Delhi, was holding darbar in his private hall of audience—the Diwan-i-khas. It was an imposing scene: the pure white marble of the walls, ornamented with delicate inlaid work; the rich decorations and gorgeous colour of the ceiling; the arches with mosaic traceries, giving views of beautiful gardens: all this would have made a fit setting for a mighty monarch's court. The old king, tremulous with age and anxieties, sat in the centre on a dais of white marble, and no doubt deplored at times the cupidity of his predecessor Nadir Shah, who had turned into money, a hundred years before, the wondrous peacock throne, in which the spread tails of the birds were encrusted with sapphires and rubies and diamonds and other precious stones, cunningly arranged in imitation of the natural colours. But his monarchy was sadly diminished in wealth and dignity. Successive invaders had all taken something for themselves; and though he was in courtesy styled king, and received royal salutes from the guards at his doors, his territory had been confined, since the British imposed their rule upon him, to his palace; and instead of the untold wealth that had once been his, he had been granted the mere pittance of £120,000 a year. And now it seemed that he would lose even this, for the British still held the Ridge; his generals and their forty thousand men had as yet made good none of their confident boasts of sweeping the handful of Feringhis away, and the old king wished with all his heart that the mutineers had let well alone. He was depressed, wretched; what a mockery seemed that gilt scroll of Persian on the arches above his head—

> "If on earth is a bower of bliss,
> It is this, it is this, it is this."

The hall was thronged. There was Bakht Khan, the commander-in-chief, the square blunt soldier, who was yet said by some to hide under his bluffness a character of cunning and duplicity. To him the querulous old king turned a

cold shoulder; for he had been for several weeks in the city, and yet no success had attended his arms save the burning of Alipur—a trumpery feat. There was Mirza Mogul, daily growing more jealous of his supplanter. Bakht Khan's men had received six months' pay in advance ('tis true it was the product of their own plundering), while Mirza Mogul had the greatest difficulty in squeezing a few thousand rupees out of the treasury to satisfy his clamorous troops. There was Ahsanullah, the king's physician, a thin fox-faced man in black; and Mirza Nosha, the poet, with verses in his pocket composed to celebrate the victory when it was won; and near him Hassan Askari, who had in his pocket Bakht Khan's order for the construction of five hundred ladders, so that the sepoys might escape over the walls if the English took the city. All the notabilities of Delhi were there, and for hours the old king sat, receiving petitions, hearing demands for redress from merchants who had been plundered, listening to the Kotwal's reports of the misdeeds of the young prince Abu Bakr, who was constantly intoxicated and engaged in riotous disorder. Saligram, the banker, complained that all his papers and chests had been rifled, and he was a ruined man. A messenger came in and reported that the English were constructing a new battery within half-a-mile of the walls. A poor old man, who said he was the king's cousin, made an offering of two rupees in aid of the holy cause. Another messenger entered with news that a detachment of the Nimuch brigade had gone out to fight the English, who had all run away. The king called him a liar; he had heard such news before. And then, just as the darbar was closing, there entered one of the king's attendants, and asked if the Lord of the World would graciously condescend to receive a chief from the hill country, who had entered the city at the head of three hundred well-mounted men.

"Who is he?" asked the king.

"Hazur, his true name no one knows; but his horsemen call him Asadullah, and in truth he is a very lion in wrath and courage. He has done great things among the Feringhis at Agra and Gwalior, and being at one time a prisoner of the English he hates them with a bitter hatred. And now he comes with three hundred brave men whom he has gathered, and craves leave to present a nassar to the Pillar of State, and to offer his services in the cause."

"We desire not to receive him," said the king. "Have we not soldiers enough in Delhi to pay, without adding more? If the English cannot be beaten with the forty thousand we now have, how shall three hundred help us?"

This was mere querulousness, as every one in the hall knew. The king dared not offend anybody at this critical moment in his affairs, certainly not a chief who could command a body of troops. After bidding the man wait, and keeping him waiting for a long time while he went through the form of consulting his advisers, the king announced that he would see this warrior whom men named the Lion of God. The official retired. In a few minutes there entered the hall a stately figure with flowing white beard and red turban. He made obeisance to the king, handed him a nassar of a hundred rupees, and declared in a strong, resonant voice that he was ready to fight the English, he and his three hundred men.

There was a group of officers at the end of the hall from which entrance was had to the Akab baths. They were so much preoccupied with a matter they were discussing, that the proceedings in the centre of the hall had for some time escaped their notice. Now, however, at the sound of that ringing voice, one of them, Minghal Khan, started, and immediately afterwards changed his position in such a way that he was partially hidden by one of the columns supporting the arcade. And there he remained until the rising of the king signified that the audience was at an end. Then he made towards the door among the throng, keeping close to the wall, and moving in the manner of one who avoids observation.

But the crowd was thick, and its departure slow, so that when the chief, whom his men had named Asadullah, left the side of the king—who had kept him in talk, having apparently taken a fancy to him—it chanced that as his eyes ranged round the hall, they fell upon the face of Minghal Khan, who at that very moment had turned a little aside to look at the new-comer. Their glances crossed; a light flashed in the eyes of each; and Asadullah, whom Minghal had known as Rahmut Khan, took a step forward as though to hasten after his enemy. But he checked himself. The king's palace was no place for the settlement of a personal quarrel: no doubt there would be opportunities. Each of the chiefs knew, as he caught the look in the other's eyes, that the fact that they were engaged in a common cause would not weigh for a moment if they came within reach of one another. The many

discordant elements in Delhi were held together for the time by their common hatred of the English; if that bond were relaxed, they would fly apart with shattering force.

Minghal Khan got out of the palace before Rahmut Khan, and hastened immediately to his house. He then dispatched his khitmutgar to bid the attendance of one of the jamadars of his regiment.

"Salaam, Azim Ali," he said in response to the officer's greeting. "I have but now returned from the palace. The old king grows more feeble, and his authority less and less. There was much talk among us of the arrears of pay; but it is indeed true that the treasury is all but empty, and it will never be full while Wallidad Khan is collector of the revenue, and such pitiful nassars are brought to the king as were brought to-day. Imagine, Azim Ali, a bent old dodderer who claimed kinship with the Lord of the World, and offered him two rupees!"

"It is indeed pitiful," said the jamadar. "What is to be said to the sowars? They will assuredly plunder the shops if they get no pay, and the general has said that all plunderers shall be hanged."

"What, indeed? Is it not hard that our men, who have been enduring the heat and burden, throwing away their lives in fighting the English, should be worse off than such brigands as the men whom this Asadullah has brought into the city? The general forbids plunder: well, he is a friend of mine, and must be obeyed. But these new-comers, have they not plundered? What have they done but load themselves with the loot of villages, and snapped up ill-defended convoys—enterprises of little difficulty and less danger? There is great talk of this old freebooter as a man of high courage: hai! it is false. Do I not know of him? They call him lion; a more fitting name would be pariah dog. He is not a man to risk his skin. And yet, forsooth, he comes into Delhi at the head of these three hundred, and the king slobbers over him, and without doubt he will squeeze from the treasury what rupees he can, and then, when the word comes to fight, he will shelter himself behind us who know what fighting is, and expect his full share of plunder when the English are beaten. Hai! it is a shame and a scandal."

"True, most noble subahdar; it is enough to make our men rise up and claim that all who enter thus with full hands should share what they have among

us."

"And what they could not keep but for us; for are there not princes in the city who, were these men left undefended, would swoop down like hawks upon them and strip them of all they have? Without us, trained soldiers, would not the English assuredly catch them and hang them up? Is this thing to be endured? Here are we, lodged within a shout's distance of them, and we starve while they live on the fat of the land."

Minghal knew the man he was talking to. He was a simple ruffian, who grew more and more indignant as his superior artfully stimulated his discontent.

"It would not be a matter of surprise to me," Minghal continued, "were the men to rise in their wrath and secure for themselves what is their just due. As a servant of our lord the king, and a loyal lieutenant of Bakht Khan, our commander-in-chief, I could not countenance such a transgression of his strict command; but I am a man like them: I know what hunger is: am I not myself often at my wit's end for the wherewithal to buy a meal, with many months' pay due to me? And as a man I could assuredly not blame any action that our sowars might take."

The simple jamadar gulped at the bait. Minghal had no need to say more. That same night, a Pathan trader who had entered the city by the Ajmir gate at sundown, just before all the gates were closed, witnessed a scene not unfamiliar in Delhi at this time of unrest and relaxed authority. In the space before a serai near the Jama Masjid, a great crowd of men was engaged in desperate rioting. He thought at first that it was one of those little affairs in which the princes of the blood, notably Abu Bakr, sometimes disported themselves: a raid upon a banker, or a silversmith, or some merchant who was suspected of having feathered his nest. But inquiring of an onlooker who stood out of harm's way watching the conflict, he learnt that the regiment of Minghal Khan—that bold warrior, and friend of the commander-in-chief—was attacking the quarters of a troop of three hundred Irregulars, men of all castes and no country, who had arrived in the city that day and been granted quarters in this serai by the king.

"And thou art a Pathan, too, by thy speech, O banijara," said the man. "Pathans are ever unruly—I mean no offence to thee, who art a man of

peace. The noble subahdar, Minghal Khan, is a Pathan, and the leader of the new-comers is a Pathan also."

"What is his name, O bariya?" asked the trader, judging by his informant's attire that he was a swordsmith.

"Men call him Asadullah, and say he is a very great warrior. Bah! There is too much talk of very great warriors, and too little fighting. I am a good Musalman, and no man can say I am not a faithful subject of the king—may Allah be his peace!—but it is nevertheless the truth, O banijara, that I was more prosperous under the English raj than I am this day."

"There will be work for thee to-morrow, O grinder of swords, for many edges will be blunted. Hai! What a din they make! I can hardly hear myself speak. Why are they using no firearms?"

"That is easy to understand. I speak to a friend—thou and I are men of peace. Well, without doubt, this is not a quarrel that suddenly arises from a chance hot word. Not so—it was purposed from the beginning. Some of these new men are out in the streets, beholding the many fine sights of this city, and that seemed a good occasion to the men of Minghal Khan; for in truth these new men are said to have good store of plunder they have taken from the English as they came hither; and, as all men know, the soldiers of Minghal Khan, and of many another officer, are yearning for their pay. And so they came and fell upon the men of Asadullah at their quarters yonder, and brought no firearms, since they make a great noise; and the new men being taken wholly by surprise, had not time so much as to fetch their muskets. As thou seest, there is great fighting at the gate, and some are even now scaling the wall. Wah! Unless the Kotwal or Bakht Khan come with a great force, methinks in a little those men of Asadullah will be in a sad case, for the others are much greater in number. It is a good fight; as thou sayest, it will give me work to-morrow, my shop is hard by; and therefore I say, let them fight on."

The two stood side by side watching the fray. There was a great noise of clashing arms, and fierce yells, but such uproar was too common to have brought as yet any of the authorities to the spot. The defenders of the serai were hard pressed. Some had already been driven within the gate; more and more of the attackers had mounted the wall and leapt into the enclosure; and

it seemed that the swordsmith's forecast of the end would be justified. But suddenly a group of eight or ten men rounded the corner of the street, remote from where the two watchers stood. They halted for a moment, as though they did not at once comprehend the meaning of the scene before them. The night was dark, but the light of the stars revealed those new arrivals as stalwart, turbaned men. Their pause was very brief. Then, drawing their talwars, they swept upon the rear of the hundred or more sepoys thronging in front of them. "Wah, wah!" they shouted, and their fierce war-cry fell upon the ears of the sepoys at the same time as their terrible weapons smote their limbs. The Pandies were taken utterly by surprise, and began to scatter in a panic. The diversion came in the nick of time. The defenders took heart from the arrival of their comrades; the attackers were divided in mind whether to stay or to flee; and in a very few moments the whole throng had melted away; those who were on the wall saw themselves unsupported and dropped to the street, and the new-comers followed in hot chase, being joined by others from within the gates.

"Wah! That was Asadullah himself," said the swordsmith. "Of a truth, he is a great warrior. Didst thou see him?"

"I saw a big man, and he seemed older than I had supposed, but it was too dark to see him clearly. I am a Pathan, as thou didst say, and were I a man of war, I would fain have had a part with them. But being a man of peace, far be it from me to endanger my skin in broils of this kind."

"Well, it is over now, and 'twere best for us to get ourselves home. Verily I shall have work in the morning, and it befits to be up early. The night is damp and chill, and now I look at thee, art thou not a-cold in that thin raiment of thine? Hill-men like thee are not wont to go so thinly clad."

"True, good bariya, and 'tis by evil chance I am as thou seest. I left my chogah in a certain place, and lo! within a little it was no longer there. I doubt not it is now among the belongings of some vile Hindu."

"Hai! Vile, indeed! When is this truce to be ended? The king has commanded that no cows be killed until the English are beaten, and we good Musalmans must forsooth abstain from that good meat for the sake of these Hindus. Wah! The time will come. Let but the English be destroyed,

and then we will see what the Hindus have to say. Get thee a warmer covering, friend, and Allah be with thee."

He turned the corner of the street and was gone. The other went on his way, and coming to a shop in the nearest bazar, and finding it closed for the night, he battered on the door until it was opened with much grumbling by the owner—a man of hooked nose and venerable appearance. After nearly an hour's bargaining, the customer departed, wearing his purchase, a well-lined Afghan chogah. Then he proceeded quickly to a small serai on the other side of the Chandni Chauk.

"Salaam, bhatiyara, thou beholdest me again," he said on entering.

The innkeeper looked up with a start from among the pots in which he was preparing supper for two guests.

"Salaam," he said, with no great cordiality. "Thou hast been on a long visit to that friend of thine."

"Truly. Who can strive against fate! I was smitten with a fever. We hill-men suffer grievously in the plains in this time of rain. But I am now recovered, Allah be praised! and ready to go once more about my business. Give me to eat, I am very hungry; and then I will sleep. To-morrow I will go forth again with my goods, and maybe I shall find more ready buyers."

"Hai! who can strive against fate! But a few days after thou hadst departed, there came in the middle of the night vile robbers, and lo! when I awoke in the morning, thy goods were not. It is kismet."

"Thou sayest! and my camel—did he die?"

There was a tone of mockery in the question which apparently escaped the notice of the innkeeper, though it provoked a chuckle from the two traders who were tearing apart with their fingers a well-stewed fowl.

"Hai!" said the innkeeper, with a mournful face; "when thou didst not return, thy camel would not eat, and his hump sank away to flatness, and on the tenth day he died."

"Thou sayest? Of a truth, bhatiyara, he must needs come to life again no later than the morrow's sunrise, and those vile robbers must be pricked in

their hearts and restore the goods they have stolen, or assuredly the Kotwal will come and visit this serai, and he will say, since it is so ill a place for man and beast, it must be made desolate. What must be will be."

"Hai! hai!" cried the man, lifting his hands, "how should a dead camel breathe again the breath of life, and evil-doers become good?"

"Even these things are possible, good bhatiyara. And now let me eat, and make ready a good charpoy. These things that I say shall come to pass even while I sleep."

And his two fellow-guests laughed aloud, while the innkeeper muttered in his beard.

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH

Wolf and Jackal

Next morning Ahmed found his camel contentedly munching at his stall, with no visible diminution of his hump; and his bales of goods were ranged in decent order along the walls, though when he came to examine them he found that their contents were strangely mixed. But he said nothing of that; he only expressed to the innkeeper his gratification that the night had seen such wonders wrought, and after a simple breakfast he went out and, hiring no coolie this time, took a few of his more costly wares to visit his old friend the darwan of Minghal Khan. Cordial greetings passed between them; the darwan had pleasant recollections of the dainties with which he had been regaled by this excellent Pathan at his former visit. Then he asked why his friend had been so long in hiding the light of his countenance from him. Ahmed told him that he had been ill, and made him laugh heartily at his story of how the rascally innkeeper had brought a dead camel to life and restored stolen goods in the space of one night.

"And now, good darwan," he said, "thinkest thou I might show some of my wares to your noble master? My business has halted while I was sick, and I must needs sell somewhat lest I starve."

"Truly, my friend, it is an ill time. The great man has no money; we, his poor creatures who are not worthy to unloose his shoes, get no wages, and our khansaman sells more and more of our chattels day by day to get the wherewithal to buy our poor food. And I fear me, even if the illustrious one were as rich as Nadir Shah of old renown, it would be vain to approach him now. But a little while ago there came a chaprasi with news that his regiment had been rioting. Indeed (and this khabar was whispered in my ear) the men tried last night to gain some little sustenance from the plunder of some new men who have come—woe upon them!—to this sorely crowded city. And by ill-hap they had the worse of the encounter; verily these new-comers sting like scorpions; and their leader, one Asadullah, has gone to the palace to complain to the Protector of the Poor, our illustrious

king. The great one is even now clothing himself in haste to go also to the palace and acquaint the Illustrious with the truth of the matter. And so it is an ill time, as I said; neither his pocket nor his temper suits with business of thy sort."

"Hai! how wretched is my lot!" said Ahmed.

"Here is the great one's horse," said the darwan, as a sais led the animal from the courtyard and began to walk him up and down. "And behold the great one himself."

He rose from his squatting posture at the door as Minghal came out. The subahdar was clearly in a state of great annoyance. He kicked aside the small bundle which Ahmed had laid on the ground, and bade him betake himself to Jehannum.

"Merciful one, be not wroth with the meanest of thy slaves," said Ahmed, salaaming humbly. "If I might but be allowed to see thy face at some more convenient season! I have wares of great beauty and worth, even such as might delight the eyes of the hazur himself and——"

"Bas, bas!" cried Minghal. "Get thee hence and trouble me not."

He called to the sais to bring up his horse.

"There is a shawl woven most marvellously with gold threads," Ahmed said, with an air of the greatest deference. "If the magnificent one would but deign the wink of an eye——"

"Enough, I say!" cried Minghal, with his foot in the stirrup. Then a thought seemed to strike him. "Come to me to-morrow; I may then cast an eye on thy worthless trumpery."

"Hazur, thy servant's heart leaps for joy," said Ahmed, salaaming, and Minghal sprang to the saddle.

"Tell the khansaman to make ready a repast fit for princes against my return this night," he called to the darwan. "I shall not return until the sun goes down."

Then he rode off on his clattering way to the palace.

"Thou art favoured above all," said the darwan to Ahmed, "and, being a just man, thou wilt not forget to let a little flow over from thy full cup?"

"My prosperity shall be thine, worthy darwan; and the thought of the great one's favour to come will be as a delicious perfume to me this day."

On leaving the darwan, Ahmed found his way to the quarters of the men who had beaten off the attack of Minghal's regiment the night before. He felt some curiosity to see this warlike Pathan, named Asadullah, whose arrival had so soon been followed by a broil. When he reached the serai, he learnt that the chief had not yet returned from the palace; and knowing that Minghal had also gone thither to put his side of the story before the king, Ahmed guessed that the poor old monarch would have an uncomfortable morning.

He spent the rest of the forenoon in wandering about the city, picking up what news he could. Then he returned to his own serai for his midday meal and a sleep; he foresaw that he might have little opportunity for rest during the night. On awaking, he went out to the bazar and bought a stout hook, like those by which carcases are hung in butchers' shops. As he left the bazar, he overtook Minghal Khan's khansaman, who was returning with a load of provisions he had bought for his master's supper. Ahmed had wished more than once for an opportunity of conversing with the khansaman, and the present moment seemed favourable.

"Salaam, worthy khansaman," he said, stepping alongside the old man.

"Salaam, but I know thee not, stranger, and I am in haste," was the reply.

"Far be it from me to hinder one so venerable in years and so exalted in position, yet since thy worthy master has deigned to say that he will let his eye rest on my poor wares to-morrow, I would fain say a respectful word to the ruler of his household. It is a proud thing to serve one so high in the king's favour, and I warrant thou findest his service more to thy taste than that of him thou wast wont to serve—the accursed Feringhi."

The khansaman looked at him sharply.

"What knowest thou—a banijara from the hills, if my eyes see aright—of whom I served?" he said.

"Thy excellent darwan is a friend of mine," replied Ahmed, "and he has told me one or two things. How thy heart must have rejoiced when thy old master and all his family met their fate! Didst thou have a hand in it?"

"Would that I had!" said the khansaman, with fervour. "Would that all the dogs of Feringhis were even as that dog of a sahib under whose yoke I groaned!"

"'Tis beyond doubt that all his family were slain? Had he many sons?"

"None, save the child that now learns the vile learning of the Feringhis far over sea."

"That is pity. Maybe he had daughters?"

"One pale-faced thing, of no account."

"Without doubt she is dead also. Though indeed it is said that some of the Feringhis' women escaped, being preserved by some unworthy children of the Prophet. Even as I came hither I beheld such a pale-faced thing in the palki of a zamindar; not that I saw her, the palki being closed; but it was told me by the palki-wallahs. She had been seized out of the hands of her ayah and khitmutgar as she sought safety."

Ahmed watched the khansaman narrowly as he said this; but there was no change in the man's expression. It was that of complete indifference.

"I perceive we are drawing near to the great one's house," he continued. "Salaam aleikam!"

In a small lean-to off the stable of the serai, Ahmed fastened the hook he had bought to a short length of rope, and wound this about his body beneath his outer garment. Just after sunset he issued forth, carrying a lathi, and made his way across the Chandni Chauk to the narrow lane which ran past the back of Minghal's house. When he reached the spot at which he had descended from the colonnade, he unwound the rope, and raised it by means of the lathi until it rested on the top of the wall. Then he climbed up the rope, and having disengaged the hook, let himself down on the other side by means of the lathi; he laid his simple apparatus in a corner under the colonnade. While doing this he kept a wary eye on the servants' quarters

that looked on to the garden, taking care to dodge the beam of light that issued from the kitchen, where, no doubt, preparations were being made for Minghal Khan's evening meal. Then he stole across the garden, and lurked for a little by the door.

Two hours later, Minghal Khan, having finished the more substantial portion of his meal, was reclining on cushions in his dining-room, eating sweetmeats and sipping sherbets with his guest, the Mirza Akbar Sultan. Both were in good spirits. The sweetmeats were a portion of some score hundredweight which the Kotwal had recently bought for the delectation of the soldiers, and which the king himself had inspected and deigned to taste. And a day or two before Akbar Sultan himself had summoned all the wealthy bankers of the city, at the instigation of the queen, and by means in which he was an adept, had extorted from them 8,000 rupees, a thousand of which he had immediately appropriated—was he not a prince?—handing five hundred, with princely generosity, to his good friend Minghal Khan.

"Truly thou art much in my debt," said the prince; "not more for rupees than for my support in that matter of the old rogue."

"I am thy unworthy servant, illustrious one," returned the other, "and all I have is thine. And how can I repay thee better than by helping thee to somewhat of the old rogue's booty?"

"Art thou sure he has this booty?"

"My head upon it, illustrious one. For what purpose has he sought refuge in this city? Only that his booty may not fall into the hand of the Feringhis, for assuredly he has no mind to fight them. Wah! thou camest to the palace at a fortunate hour,—fortunate for thee and me. That old rogue Asadullah forestalled me there, and the king had waxed hot against me, listening to his tale. He had that moment sent for me when I arrived. And though when I put the matter before him his anger was somewhat appeased, the issue would not have been so pleasing hadst thou not come to lend me the aid of thy persuasive voice. Wah! Did not the old rogue fume when the king turned to him and bade him cause no more trouble! Didst thou mark his flaming eye? Didst thou hear him mutter words of rage as he turned his back on the Pillar of State and strode from the presence? Wah! the king will favour him no more; never was his dignity so scantly regarded."

"But this booty of which thou speakest—how is one to obtain it? I have bled the shroffs; there will be a great wailing among them, and even I dare not do more for a while, lest the king, who is unstable as water, should again visit me with his displeasure."

"Listen, illustrious one; I know of a way. Asadullah has not yet proved himself. He has yet to go out and fight the Feringhis. Now, as thou knowest, I am a partaker in all Bakht Khan's counsels. We do little against the Feringhis at present, but to-morrow is Bakr-Id, and what more fitting than that we should mark the great day with a terrible onslaught against the infidels? Asadullah must then go forth to fight; Bakht Khan shall order it; and while he is absent with his band, what easier than to visit the serai where he lodges, and take the treasure that he conceals there?"

"But he will leave men to guard it."

"A handful only, and what will they avail against thy faithful ones? And, moreover, may it not come to pass that Asadullah will be slain in the fight? Then he will return not, and there will be none to say us nay. And if, perchance, he returns, can he gainsay what we have done for the holy cause? Here are thousands of faithful ones perishing for lack of their just pay; is it not justice that ill-got treasures should be taken from the few and divided among the many?"

"That is justice," said the prince. "It would be a good thing for the great number of the faithful that Asadullah should go forth to fight and not return. But how can we be sure that Bakht Khan will send him forth and set him in the forefront of the battle?"

"He will do so at thy persuasion, prince. As for me, it were best I held my peace, for the noise of this quarrel between the old rogue and me has gone abroad, and if I were to propose this thing Bakht Khan might suspect me of a desire to serve my own ends more than the interests of the state. But with thee it is otherwise, and Bakht Khan will assuredly pay heed to thee."

At this moment Bakht Khan was announced. After greetings, the prince cunningly led the conversation to the desired point. He suggested that this new-comer was not a fighting-man at all.

"He is a braggart," he said. "Lo, the father killed a tomtit, and the son, forsooth, is called a mighty archer! They talk much of this Asadullah's might in war, but what has he done?"

"I know a fighting-man when I see one, prince," said the sturdy general, "and if ever there was a fighting-man that so proved himself to me at the first look, this Pathan is the man."

"Bah!" sneered the prince. "A dog is a lion in his own lane. Dost thou judge of sweetmeat by the loftiness of the shop where it is bought?"

"Does the cat by the fire know the worth of a hunting-dog?" retorted Bakht Khan, bridling. "I am a fighter, and I know the marks of a fighter."

"Shoes are proved on the feet, not on the last," said the prince. "Is it not easy to prove the truth? Asadullah has not yet done battle with the English. Let him go forth and show himself a man of war. As for me, verily I believe that when the time comes he will be found wanting. Did not the fox say he would rather suffer a hundred hungers than behold one dog's face?"

The commander-in-chief fell into the trap. He vowed that Asadullah should indeed go forth and fight, and he was ready to wager that the Pathan would acquit himself well. A great sortie was planned for the following night—the night of Bakr-Id, the first of August—the day on which Abraham's sacrifice of Ishmael was commemorated by the slaying of a bull, a great day among good Mohammedans. Asadullah should be commanded to lead an attack on one part of the British lines, and by his conduct then should the dispute be decided. The three men sat long discussing the details of the proposed operations. It was late before the party broke up, and when the visitors had gone, and Minghal had retired to bed, the khansaman came in sleepily to clear away the remnants of their refreshments and put out the lamp. He carried the tray into the other room, listened, as if to make sure that all the household was in repose, then slid the panel of the almirah and disappeared in the hole in the wall, carrying his tray with him.

A moment later, a figure crept out from beneath a divan against the wall of the dining-room. He crossed the landing to the opposite room, went to the almirah, and slid back the panel. But then he was baulked—the wall appeared solid. There was no lock, no handle by which the door in it could

be opened. Ahmed felt up and down, from right to left, and was almost in despair, when the wall opened slowly, as of itself. He started back, thinking the khansaman was returning; but finding that all was silent he approached again. Unknowing, he had pressed a little wooden button cunningly let into the stone, and released the spring that held the slab in place. He crept through, and took the precaution of pushing the stone back, then began to descend the steps of the narrow spiral staircase on which he found himself. He counted the steps—they were thirty; and then he came to a low passage, as narrow as the staircase, through which only one person could pass at a time. It was so low that he knocked his head against its roof in the darkness. But some few paces in front of him he saw a thin line of light across the floor. He stealthily approached; there was a door. He heard voices, but could not distinguish words. Was the door fastened? He pushed it gently—it yielded.

"If I could but be sure she was safe!" he heard a low voice say.

"Without doubt she is safe, sahib," was the reply. The voice was the khansaman's. Ahmed thrilled. The khansaman was faithful after all. He had his old master here in hiding. Who would have suspected so unlikely a place? And he was trying to cheer the doctor's despondency as to the fate of his daughter. Clearly he had not told him what Ahmed had said of the capture of the English girl by a zamindar.

"You have no news of her?" said the first voice.

"None, sahib; but that is not strange. The missy sahib would fear to send a messenger, lest he should betray your presence. And it is harder now than it was for folk to go in and out of the city. This very day the order has gone forth that none shall enter or depart without a written word. A man—his name is Gordohan Dass, and he lives at Lattu—was going out at the Delhi gate this morning in a shigram, and the guard stopped him and searched his cart, and there they found cartridges and bullets. They were but for his own protection, he declared. Nevertheless they beat him, and took his cart and all that was in it, and sent him to the Kotwali. There is little hope of news until the sahibs come and take the city."

"Will that ever be? What are they doing? Will they never begin the assault?"

"In Allah's good time, sahib. They are waiting on the Ridge; none can move them. Why they wait so long who can tell? The people say in the city that they are but five hundred now; that the colonels eat grain like their horses; that three generals have killed themselves before their troops for shame. But it cannot be true, sahib, for else why do the sepoys always come back discomfited? No; Allah is great, and the sahibs will yet come and punish the evil-doers, and then all will be well."

"But it is so long! How long is it since you found me in the street, and brought me here?"

"Two moons and more, sahib."

"Two months! And we have heard nothing all that time of Mary. I must go, Kaluja. In this dress none would recognize me; I can pass as one of their own hakims. You must help me to escape from the city."

"Nay, sahib; it is not safe. And besides, you are too weak—you would fall in the street."

"No, I am strong enough now. See, I can walk quite well."

There was a brief silence; then Ahmed heard a groan.

"Did I not say so, sahib? It would be folly; it would kill you. You must be patient."

"I could be patient if I were certain of Mary's safety. Did not your messenger return? Are you sure he has not returned?"

"I have neither seen nor heard of him, sahib."

"It is this anxiety that is sapping my strength. My wounds were healed long ago. Is there no one in this great city you can trust to go and come again?"

And then Ahmed pushed the door wide open, and entered the room.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST

Master and Servant

Ahmed found himself in a small square chamber, dimly lit by an oil-lamp. The air was close, and pervaded by an odour new to him: the pungent odour that salutes one at the entrance of a chemist's shop. The room was naturally lofty, but its height was artificially diminished now by a large blanket spread from corner to corner.

Against the further wall stood a charpoy, and on it lay a tall grey-bearded man clad in the customary garments of a respectable Mohammedan. A table was at his side, with a tray holding a dish and a phial or two. The khansaman was standing at the foot of the bed. At the entrance of Ahmed he uttered a cry, and seized a knife from the table. There was a silence, in the tenseness of which time seemed to be abolished. The khansaman stared with eyes that spoke his fear. Then Ahmed held up his hand and spoke: "Be at peace, good khansaman," he said; "I have news of the sahib's daughter."

The man's overcharged feelings found relief in a sob, and the recumbent figure started up.

"Is it true? You do not mock me?" he cried. "Who are you?"

"I am Ahmed Khan, of Lumsden Sahib's Guides, and I am sent into this city by Hodson Sahib, to say that the hazur's daughter is safe at Karnal."

The shock of this good news rendered the doctor speechless. He was seized with a violent trembling, and the khansaman hastily poured a little liquid into a glass and gave it to his master. When he had recovered he asked Ahmed many questions: whether he had seen the missy sahib, how she looked, whether she had received his note, why the messenger had not returned. To these Ahmed replied as well as he could, but he said nothing of the part he had himself played in the saving of the girl.

Then he himself asked questions, and learnt from the khansaman the simple story of the doctor's rescue. He had been left for dead by the mutinous sepoys a few yards from his door, and had there been found by Kaluja Dass, who had conveyed him by night to the secret underground chamber. It was situated immediately below the fountain in the garden, and was ventilated and dimly lit in the daytime through an ingenious series of openings in the ornamental stonework at the base of the fountain. What appeared to an observer in the garden as a delicate pattern of tracery was really the ventilating system of the room below. There he had remained ever since. The healing of his wounds had been slow, and his anxieties and the deprivation of fresh air had retarded the full recovery of his strength. No one but the khansaman knew of the secret entrance through the surgery wall, and it had been a happy thought of his to place the almirah against it, and to make the sliding panel. The blanket was stretched across the ceiling so as to prevent a stray beam of light from the oil-lamp from filtering through the apertures to the garden.

The doctor was much gratified that Ahmed had been allowed to enter the city to search for him. He inquired for his old friend General Barnard, to learn with sorrow of his death. He asked eagerly what steps had been taken to capture the city, and sighed heavily when he heard how the little army on the Ridge was waiting until the reinforcements and the siege-train which Sir John Lawrence was collecting in the Panjab should arrive. Again he pleaded with the khansaman to take him from the city, but Ahmed supported the good servant's contention that to attempt to escape now would be to court innumerable perils, and that it was better to remain in hiding until the city should be retaken. Ahmed promised to acquaint General Wilson—who had succeeded General Reed in the command—of the doctor's safety, and to send word to his daughter in Karnal. The khansaman asked very anxiously how the information was to be conveyed to the British lines. He was greatly disinclined to trust any messenger whom he did not know.

"I will take it myself," replied Ahmed.

During the conversation Dr. Craddock kept his eyes fixed on Ahmed's face, in the manner of a man seeking to recall something.

"Surely I have seen you before!" he said at length. "Have you been in Delhi before?"

"Never, sahib."

"Perhaps it was in Lahore?"

"No, sahib; I have never been there."

"I must be mistaken, then, but it seemed to me that I knew your face."

And now he was eager to get away. He did not forget the double duty he had to fulfil: news must be conveyed to the Ridge of the great assault intended for the morrow. He would have been content to inform Fazl Hak of this, and trust him to send it by one of his messengers; but the discovery of the doctor was a matter so personal to him that he was disinclined to entrust it to any one. Accordingly, he took leave of the doctor, receiving from him an affectionate message for his daughter, and then, accompanied by the khansaman, he returned by the narrow winding stair to the upper room. The two crept silently through the passage to the back staircase, and passed the servants' quarters, and came to the door leading to the garden. The khansaman noiselessly drew the bolt, and Ahmed stepped out. There was a sudden rush in the darkness. In a moment he was overwhelmed and thrown to the ground. Struggle as he might, he could not prevent the two men who had seized him from binding his arms, and then he was dragged back into the house and up the stairs, being finally deposited at the door of Minghal Khan's room.

The great man was very ill-tempered at being roused from sleep by the loud calls of his darwan. He cried out to know why his sleep was thus disturbed.

"Hazur, I have done a great deed!" cried the darwan; "even caught a dog of a robber. Open, O Great One, and see what thy servant has accomplished in his great zeal."

Minghal Khan came to the door and called for the khansaman to bring a light. Several minutes passed, and the khansaman did not appear. Growing impatient, Minghal dispatched the khitmutgar—the second of Ahmed's captors—to fetch a lamp from the kitchen. Meanwhile the darwan explained.

"Hazur, my eyes were heavy with sleep, but before seeking my charpoy I went, as is my wont, to see that all was safe for the night. In that I am not as other darwans, that eat and drink and take no thought for their masters. And lo, beneath the portico, I found a lathi and a rope with a hook at the end, and I wondered with a great wonderment. And I called the khansaman, but he came not; peradventure he has gone out on some evil work this night. And then I called Said the khitmutgar, and together we talked of what this thing might be. And even as we talked we heard the gentle drawing of the bolt, and we stood at the door, and when this son of perdition came out we seized on him, and have even now brought him before thee; surely no punishment can be too great for him."

The khitmutgar returned with a light. Minghal and the darwan recognized at the same moment that the prisoner was no other than the deferential trader whom they had seen in the morning. Of the two the darwan was the more amazed.

"Dog, what is this?" cried Minghal. "Comest thou in the night to rob me? What hast thou to say, rogue?"

Being a robber by profession himself, Minghal felt no moral indignation, and no great personal rancour against this trader who had broken into his house. It was his chief thought to turn the incident in some way to account.

"Hazur," began Ahmed, "I am the most unworthy of thy servants. I did but come to visit my good friend the darwan."

"Hazur, he has a lying tongue," interrupted the scandalized darwan. "A friend! Allah slay me if I would ever speak two comfortable words to such a dog."

"Chup!" cried Minghal. "Say on, banijara."

"The darwan has even eaten of my sweetmeats——"

"Perdition light on him!" cried the darwan. "Verily I should choke if——"

"Chup, I say! Make thy story short, dog."

"And when I found him not at the door I made bold to enter. But bethinking me then that the hazur, not knowing of my great friendship with the darwan,

might see me and conceive ill thoughts, I feared, and was seeking to slip out when this pig, who has eaten my sweetmeats, set upon me most vilely, as the hazur sees."

"Verily thou art a monstrous liar, banijara," said Minghal. "What of the rope and the hook, and the lathi? What hast thou to say of them, dog?"

"Hazur, what should I know of them; is thy servant a camel-driver?"

Minghal laughed. The trader's explanation was too glib. He wondered what the truth was. Had the man heard of his recent present of rupees and come to rob him? or was there more in it? He looked keenly at Ahmed, and suddenly noticed something strange about his beard. He stepped up to him and, taking it in his hand, began to pull, not too gently. Ahmed protested; it is an insult to a Mohammedan to pluck his beard; but Minghal laughed again, and continued pulling. In the struggle at the door a small portion of the false beard had become detached, and Minghal scented a disguise. He pulled, the beard came away gradually, with no little pain to Ahmed, for the adhesive was a strong one.

"Hold thy light nearer, khitmutgar," said Minghal.

The beard came off, and there was the banijara revealed as a smooth-faced youth. The darwan uttered cries of amazement and reproach. Minghal gave a chuckle of satisfaction.

"Wah! I know thee who thou art," he said. "Did not my heart kindle when I beheld thee? As Asadullah that old dog Rahmut Khan comes to Delhi to trouble me; as a mean banijara the puppy comes to spy upon me that he may carry away the scent to the old dog. Verily it is a good day for thee, darwan, and thou shalt have five rupees—no, that is too much—two rupees, for bakshish. Go find that khansaman."

"I have sought for him, hazur, but found him not," said the khitmutgar.

"Go seek again."

The khitmutgar departed, and returned in a minute with Kaluja Dass, grave and imperturbable as ever.

"Where hast thou been?" demanded Minghal.

"Hazur, where could I be but in my own little place, sleeping the sleep of a just servant when his work is done?"

"Bring me the keys of the strong rooms below."

In these strong rooms the princes of Delhi, who had once owned the house, had kept their valuables, and on occasion their prisoners. They were now empty. The khansaman brought the keys. Ahmed was taken down by a narrow staircase like that which led to Dr. Craddock's hiding-place. A door was opened. He was pushed in, Minghal and the servants entered after him. The room was stone-walled, stone-flagged, and bare. There was no window, but a small grating high up in one of the walls; below it was an iron staple.

"I know thy wiles," said Minghal. "Thou hast escaped me twice; thrice thou shall not. Bring a chain," he added to the khansaman. "Verily Allah is good," he continued, when the man was gone. "Thou art a Feringhi, and when all the Feringhis are ground between the upper and the nether mill-stone, there will be one among them whom they know not. But that will be when I have had my profit of thee."

The chain was brought, and Ahmed was firmly fettered to the staple.

"Give me the key, khansaman; I will keep it," said Minghal. "And know, all of you, that if this dog slips his leash, I will not only dismiss you all that moment from my service, but I will even have you flogged very thoroughly, so that you will groan for many days. That is my word; take heed to it."

And then they all went out, Minghal turned the key in the door, and Ahmed was left alone.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND

The Fight of Bakr-Id

It was Bakr-Id, the great day of Mohammedan sacrifice. Before dawn the maulavis and mullahs were busy with their preparations for the ceremonies of their religion. From early morning the streets were thronged with the faithful; green turbans and green flags were everywhere seen; long-bearded preachers, in the mosques and the bazars, and at the corners of the streets, harangued the people, promising the supreme joys of Paradise for all who should celebrate this great day by wielding the sword against the infidel; and hundreds of fanatics ranged the town, shrieking their battle-cry, "Din! Din!" Even the king's edict that, in deference to the prejudices of the Brahmins and Rajputs who formed a large proportion of the sepoy army, no bulls should be slain on this day, but only goats—even this was but a trifling check upon the enthusiasm; for the Feringhis would be utterly annihilated, and then good Mohammedans could work their will on the Hindus, whom they hated little less.

The king held his usual darbar, and then went in solemn procession with his courtiers to the Idgah, where with his own hands he sacrificed a goat. And having distributed new suits of clothing and strings of jewels to the maulavis of the mosque, he returned to the palace, where he employed himself in composing verses for the encouragement of Bakht Khan:

> "This day may all the foes of the Holy Faith be slain;
> Cut the Feringhis down, as the woodman fells the tree:
> Smite with the edge of the sword; spare not, nor refrain;
> And celebrate this festal day with martial ecstasy."

While the doddering old king was wrestling with his metres, the commander-in-chief, true to the compact made the previous night, was having an interview with Rahmut Khan. He had summoned the old chief to his presence, and found the conversation more amusing than he had expected. He began by complimenting Rahmut on his well-known prowess,

and went on to say that in some quarters doubt had been thrown both upon his military skill and his loyalty—doubt which, Bakht Khan was careful to explain, he did not share. But since it was well to silence these sceptics, and since, moreover, Rahmut Khan had not yet proved himself in fight with the English, he was required to take part in the great assault that was arranged for the coming night, and to lead his men against the breastworks of the Ridge. The particular duty assigned to him was to drive the English from a position they had newly taken up less than half-a-mile from the Mori gate.

Now Rahmut Khan, though he had not the cunning and capacity for intrigue of his rival, the whilom chief of Mandan, was not at all lacking in mother wit. He knew the source of this suspicion of which Bakht Khan spoke, and was prepared to meet it.

"I am thy servant, Bakht Khan," he said. "No one is more ready than I to fight the Feringhis; have I not suffered at their hands? But, if the favour may with humility be asked, I would beg two boons."

"Say on. Thy humility is no less than thy valour."

"The first of these boons is this. As thou knowest, my band of men is of new growth: they are all valiant fighters, but men I have gathered here and there, as Allah gave me means. Wherefore they are not skilled in the warfare of the sepoys, and in their ignorance may fall into error unless they have the fellowship of some who know the discipline of the Feringhis. I ask, then, that trained men may be sent with me—such men, to wit, as are commanded by my countryman, Minghal Khan. He burns, I doubt not, as I myself, to strike a blow against the English; for, if report speak truly, fortune has given him few opportunities hitherto. That is my boon."

Bakht Khan laughed heartily. The suggestion tickled his sense of humour. He was in no doubt as to the intention underlying it, and was not disinclined to play off one Pathan against the other. He did not admire Minghal Khan, but he had found him useful in many ways, especially through his connection with the great Maulavi. As time went on, he had grown more and more impatient of the drones in Delhi. With half the courage and *esprit de corps* that animated the English, his force could have carried the Ridge long ago. And among these drones Minghal Khan was one of the worst. He

had always some ingenious way of shirking active service. Rahmut Khan's suggestion offered him a chance too good to be missed.

"Thou art great in wisdom," he said. "It shall be even as thou dost desire. And thy second boon—what is it?"

"It is simply, excellent one, that while I am absent fighting the English, thou wilt set a guard over the little serai where we dwell. Our goods are but scanty and of little worth; but they are our all, and it would be hard indeed if, when we return from our glorious service, we find them gone. Thou knowest well there are badmashes in the city."

Again the commander-in-chief laughed.

"Why, friend Asadullah," he said; "did I not hear that in that little serai of yours there is much treasure—gotten, moreover, from others besides the Feringhis? Surely I will set a guard over it: thou shalt not be robbed of the little thou hast. Better were it if thou had nothing; for is it not the empty traveller that dances before robbers?"

Rahmut went away well satisfied. Minghal was in a very different case when he too had had an interview with the commander-in-chief. Not a word was said by Bakht Khan to show that the duty he laid upon Minghal had been suggested by his enemy and rival; he rather hinted that his design was to learn from Minghal how the old chief comported himself in the fight. Minghal had, perforce, to acquiesce in the arrangement; his position was not so secure that he could afford to show open reluctance to meet the enemy. Their orders were to lead an attack on the breastwork before the Mori gate, and then, having succeeded in that task, to work round on two sides to the ruined mosque that stood a little nearer the Ridge, and slaughter all the enemy they found there.

The attack was to be made after nightfall. Rahmut knew nothing of the ground between the city walls and the breastwork, and in the afternoon he went out with one of his men to reconnoitre. Both were mounted, and since the ground was covered with gardens which would give them cover, they ventured to ride a good distance in the direction of the goal of the night's operations.

All at once Rahmut caught sight of a man a little ahead of them, dodging among the trees in a stealthy manner, that suggested a keen desire to avoid observation. Rahmut was a born scout, and, without appearing to see the man, he kept him well in view, until convinced that he was making for the British lines. Then he gave chase suddenly, and the man, though he ran hard, was soon overtaken. Hauling him to the shade of some trees, Rahmut questioned his trembling captive, and was not long in wresting from him a confession that he was indeed on his way to the Ridge to give warning of the night attack.

Rahmut had been rendered suspicious by his recent experiences in Delhi. He was not satisfied with a general statement, but pressed the man for a precise account of his errand, and he was not greatly surprised when it came out that the informer had been sent by Minghal Khan himself, and that the important part of his message was the disclosure of the exact quarter on which Rahmut's attack was to be made. It was just what might have been expected of Minghal, as indeed of any other Pathan who happened to bear a grudge against a fellow-countryman.

Rahmut lost little time in arranging to counter this cunning move of his enemy. He took the messenger back into Delhi, the man believing that he would be handed over to the Kotwal for hanging. But Rahmut made the man take him to his own house, and he set a guard over it, and swore to the wretch that the house and all within it should be destroyed unless he did what was bidden him. And the bidding was, to go to the British lines and give the warning as Minghal had commanded, with one little change: the point of attack was to be, not that which had been assigned to Rahmut, but that which had been assigned to Minghal. Holding the informer's house and family as hostages, Rahmut had no doubt that the man would obey, and he went back to his serai satisfied with his afternoon's work.

During the day the excitement in the city had risen to fever heat. News had come in that Nana Sahib, on the approach of the British to Cawnpore, had massacred the two hundred women and children who had remained in his hands since that fatal day when their fathers and husbands had been shot down on the boats. The wiser residents of Delhi were aghast: they knew the dreadful story of that other tragedy, at Calcutta, a century before, when a hundred of the sahibs perished in the Black Hole. They knew what

retribution had fallen on Siraj-uddaula then; what would happen now, after this far more horrible butchery of women and children? But the fanatics rejoiced in the tale of blood. The greater the excesses, the more impossible to draw back. The greater the vengeance to be feared, the more imperative to strain every nerve to crush these obstinate Feringhis on the Ridge. The protraction of the siege was already doing them harm. Risings were taking place in many scattered districts; and even in the Panjab, which Jan Larrens had hitherto kept quiet, there were ominous mutterings. If the English on the Ridge could but be routed, all Northern India would be ablaze.

And so the sepoys at sunset marched in their thousands from the gates. Amid the blare of bugles, the thunder of artillery from the walls, the strident calls of the muezzins from the minarets of the mosques, proclaiming eternal glory for all who bled in the holy cause, the rebels flocked out, maddened with fanatical fury and with bang, aglow with the resolve to conquer or die.

But behind the breastworks waited British officers, cool, unemotional, with their men, British and native, seasoned warriors, disciplined, the best soldiers in the world. They watched the advancing horde as it came among the gardens, the moonbeams making a strange play of light and shade. On they came, and the great guns thundered, and the muskets crackled, and shouts and yells mingled with the brazen blare of bugles. Time after time the dusky warriors hurled themselves against the low breastworks that defended the circuit of the Ridge, coming within a score paces of them. Hour after hour the din continued, the sky blazing with the constant discharge of artillery, a shifting wall of smoke making strange patterns in the moonlight. The moon sank, and still the firing did not cease; it was not until next day's sun was mounting the sky that the survivors of the night shambled back, a discomfited mob, to the rose-red walls of the city.

What had they gained by this tremendous fusillade and bombardment? Nothing. Their ammunition had been expended by cart-loads; thousands upon thousands of rounds had been fired; but all the time they had never seen their enemy, who, behind their entrenchments, waited until they saw the whites of the rebels' eyes, and then sent them reeling back with withering volleys. Hundreds of forms lay motionless in the eye of the rising sun, some in red coats, some in white dhotis, some in the chogahs of hill-men, with turbans of many colours, amid muskets and swords and bugles,

and everywhere the green flag of the Prophet. And on the Ridge there was great rejoicing; for this bitter lesson to the Pandies had cost their masters no more than a dozen men.

Nowhere did the fight rage more fiercely on that night than at the breastworks before the Flagstaff Tower. But though fierce, the fight was short, for Rahmut Khan was no fanatic; and when he found, after a brief trial, that he was opposed, not by warriors with whom his men could contend in equal fight, but by solid ramparts which burst into flame, though behind it no men were seen, he concluded that this was fighting he did not understand, and drew off his men. And Minghal Khan, approaching with his regiment the spot from which, as he fondly hoped, most of the Feringhis had been withdrawn to meet the attack against which he had warned them, was met by a crashing volley so terrible that a third of his men were stricken down, and he himself barely escaped with his life. A bullet grazed his cheek, ploughing a red furrow through it, and carrying away the lobe of his ear; a spent bullet struck his brow, and he staggered half-unconscious to the ground. And when he regained the city, and learnt that his enemy, Rahmut, had come unscathed through the battle, and, moreover, that the men he had left to raid Rahmut's serai during his absence had been beaten off with great loss by a guard posted there, for some incomprehensible reason, by Bakht Khan himself, he boiled with insensate fury, heaping curses on the heads of those who had betrayed him.

Nor was his rage abated when he was summoned to the palace to answer the charge of instigating the attack on Rahmut's quarters. The king was seated in the hall of public audience, surrounded by a glittering company. The total failure of the night's operations had not yet been fully reported; Bakht Khan was not in attendance; and when the king recited the verses he had composed the day before, the courtiers acclaimed him as the Pearl of Poets and declared that nothing more was wanted to ensure success. But then the commander-in-chief came with his pitiful tale, and the king, with the petulance of dotage, flew into a rage and cried, "You will never take the Ridge; all my treasure is expended; the Royal Treasury is without a pice. And men tell me now that the soldiers are day by day departing to their homes. I have no hope of victory. My desire is that you all leave the city and make some other place the heart of the struggle. If you do not, then will I take such steps as may seem to me advisable."

And while the officers were trying to cheer the miserable old man, declaring that by Allah's help they would yet take the Ridge, Minghal Khan came in answer to the summons. Upon him the king poured out the vials of his wrath, demanding that he should instantly restore to the treasury the money he had been granted two days before, and ordering Bakht Khan once more to proclaim that heavy penalties should be inflicted on any who broke the peace of the city. And when Minghal began to protest, Mirza Akbar Sultan, the prince who was party to the scheme, plucked him by the sleeve and in a whisper bade him be silent. The king was beside himself with rage, he said, and it was not a propitious moment for appeals. The prince accompanied him home, and, over a bottle of spirits sent for in haste from one of the merchants, they laid their heads together, devising a plan by which they might still achieve their designs against Rahmut Khan.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD

Ordeal

The underground chamber in which Ahmed was confined was perfectly dark. The floor was damp; the air stuffy. He leant for a while against the wall, ruminating on this sudden check in his fortunes. That Minghal Khan had not killed him at once showed that he was reserved for a worse fate. And what had Minghal meant by the reference to Rahmut Khan? His words seemed to imply that he supposed father and son to have entered Delhi together, and to be engaged in some scheme against him. Ahmed was for a time at a loss to understand what had given rise to this belief. Was Minghal unaware that Rahmut was a prisoner of the English? But then he remembered the conversation he had overheard in the room above. This "old rogue," this Asadullah, of whom the officers had spoken—could it be that he was Rahmut Khan? He was a Pathan—so much all Delhi knew; was it possible that the old chief had been released, or had escaped from prison, and had come into the city to wreak vengeance on the sahibs? This was a course he was very likely to follow: yet Ahmed hoped that it was not so; he did not like to think of his adoptive father and himself being on opposite sides.

Then he fell a-wondering how long he was to remain thus mewed up. And remembering the talk of a great onslaught to be made on the British lines on the morrow, he was dismayed. If Minghal Khan went out to fight he might remain absent for a whole day or more; he might, indeed, never come back; and then, unless a way could be found out of this dungeon, or some one came to release him, he might starve to death. The thought made his blood run cold, and in a sudden frenzy he began to strain at his bonds, trying to tear the staple from the wall and to snap the links of the chain. But from this he soon desisted; his struggles were useless; he only bruised himself. His exertions and the stuffiness of the room had made him hot; he was parched with thirst.

He sank down upon the floor, and squatted there, trying to calm himself. There was perfect silence. By and by he fell into a doze, and woke with a start in confusion of mind, from which he was roused by the clank of his chain as he moved. How long had he been asleep? Was it night or day? The profound stillness oppressed him; if he could but have heard some slight sound he would not have felt so utterly desolate. Schooling himself to patience, he tried to kill time by repeating aloud all the words of English he could remember, attempting to copy the accent of Hodson Sahib. He was surprised to find how many words came to his tongue with the effort. But speech was difficult to a dry throat. He lay down and slept again: maybe presently Minghal would relent so far as to bring him food.

Thus between sleeping and waking he passed the long hours—he knew not how many; and was vividly conscious of his discomforts, when at last he heard the light shuffling of feet in the corridor outside the room. Then a light shone through the thin crack at the bottom of the door; the key turned in the lock, and three figures entered. The first was Minghal Khan; then came the darwan with a lamp; the other was a stranger. And even Minghal wore a different look. His eyes were haggard; a huge bandage swathed his head; one arm was in a sling.

"Thou art yet alive, thou son of a dog," said Minghal. "It is well."

He bade the darwan hold the light nearer to Ahmed.

"Now hearken to me, and do my bidding," said Minghal again. "I have here a munshi, who will write the words thou sayest. Thou wilt send a message to Rahmut Khan, the rogue that calls himself thy father, and say to him that thou art in the hands of enemies. The bearer of thy letter is a man to be trusted, and if thy father will accompany him, he will bring him to the place where thou art, so that a plan of escape may be devised."

"And how shall my father know that this is a true letter from me, seeing that it will be written by a hand he knows not?" said Ahmed. It was well, he thought, that Minghal should still believe him to have come to the city with his father.

"Thou canst at least write thy name, or make some mark that he will know."

"I can do so much, it is true. And what if I do this thing?"

"I will set thee free before another sunrise."

"And dost thou think I do not see through thy wile, nor know the naughtiness of thy heart? Let thy munshi write; I will set no hand to it."

"Dog, dost thou deny me? Knowest thou not that I can slay thee where thou standest, or keep thee without bread to eat and water to drink until thou diest?"

"I know; but I have said."

"Thou fool! I will bring thee to a better mind; aye, or so serve thee that thy mind will utterly go from thee. Shall a whelp defy me? Go, darwan, bring bread and water."

The darwan set his lamp on the floor and went out. When he returned with the bread and water, Minghal bade him put them down just beyond Ahmed's reach with his chain at full length.

"See!" cried the furious man. "There is bread, but thou canst not eat it; water, but thou canst not drink it. Chew thy thoughts, for thou wilt have nought else to chew until thou dost bend thy stubborn neck and do even as I have commanded. I will come again in the morning; perchance thy rumination in the dark will give thee counsel."

And having struck Ahmed across the face, he went away with the two men, and locked the door after him.

For a time Ahmed was so much enraged at the indignity he had suffered that he could think of nothing else. But when calmness returned he reflected on what had happened. Minghal must be mad to suppose that he would lend himself to so transparent a trap. And yet could he endure? He strained towards the food, but stretching his full length on the floor he could not touch it; yes, the tips of his fingers just touched the jar of water. He scratched at it, hoping that it would turn and come a little nearer; but his movements had the opposite effect, and soon his longest finger could not even feel the vessel.

He drew back, and huddled on the damp stones. The torture in store terrified him; could he withstand it? His tongue was parched; he felt

gnawing pains; his brow was damp with fear. He closed his eyes, perhaps death would come in sleep. But now he could not even sleep; there seemed to be a hammering at his brow; wild thoughts chased one another through his brain. He got up and walked about at the utmost tether of his chain until the clank of the metal became itself a torture. Then he moved his arms in the motions of drill; he felt that only by action could he ward off madness.

So the hours dragged on. Surely the sun had now risen. Why had not Minghal returned? When he did return Ahmed would beg as a boon to be slain at once. He listened for footsteps. There was none. He walked about again; then stopped, fancying he heard another sound besides the clanking of the chain. But the stillness was as of the grave. He lay down, covering his head with his arms; if he could but sleep! And he was at last falling into the slumber of exhaustion when a slight sound struck upon his ear. Or was it a dream sound? Every sense was strung to the highest tension. He strained his ears; he must have been mistaken. But no; that was a sound, a creak. Minghal was returning. He got up, and his chain clanked. He stood motionless. Why did not the door open? There was another creak, and another interval of silence; and then he felt a sudden slight gust of fresher air strike his cheek; surely the door was open. Next moment there was a click, a spark, and in the sudden flash he thought he saw a figure in the room. Another spark, followed by a red glow, that grew brighter, and then a low bluish flame. It was the kindling of a lamp, and behind it he saw Kaluja Dass.

"Hush!" said the khansaman in a whisper. "Here is food and drink."

Ahmed seized upon the jar of water and drank his fill, then upon the bread covered with honey, and ate ravenously.

"I cannot set you free," said the khansaman, still in a whisper. "The tyrant has sworn he will dismiss us all if you escape, and I have to think of the master. I took the vile one's keys from his raiment as he slept. I must go back lest he wakes. I will come again. The sahib knows: we will try to think of some plan."

"What is doing?" whispered Ahmed. "Why is Minghal swathed?"

"He fought and was wounded. And, moreover, he is shamed before the king. His men assailed the serai of Asadullah, and the king is wroth with him."

"This Asadullah—who is he?"

"A warrior that serves the king, with three hundred men."

"What manner of man?"

"An old man with white beard, of good stature and noble presence. He wears a red turban; he is from the hills."

"He is my father."

"Sayest thou? Then will I go to him and acquaint him with thy plight. Verily he will know how to deal with the evil man."

Ahmed was tempted to agree; but with second thoughts he saw that the khansaman must not do what he had said. Rahmut Khan was among the mutineers: he could not assist Ahmed without compromising them both. Only if Ahmed threw in his lot with the rebels would it be fair to ask the old chief to intervene in his behalf. And Ahmed was one of Lumsden's Guides; he had eaten the sahibs' salt; he was of the sahibs himself: the Guides were true to their allegiance.

"It may not be, good khansaman," he said. "Presently, thou wilt understand."

"Allah be with thee!" said the khansaman.

"And with thee, khansaman."

The servant took away the vessels in which he had brought the food, and went out with stealth as he had entered. There was left no trace of the meal. Ahmed laid himself down again; his body was comforted, the light of hope soothed his mind, and at last he slept.

Some hours later he was wakened by the entrance of Minghal. The same proposition was put to him: he rejected it with scorn. Minghal was amazed to find him still obdurate. The food was untouched on the floor. Would

nothing quell the spirit of this youth? He tried to beat down his captive's resolution, and failing, went away in a rage, declaring that he would yet starve him into submission.

Ahmed found it easier to endure the slow-dragging hours of the long day. In the dead of night the khansaman again came to him with food. He said that the doctor sahib had bidden him release the prisoner, even at the risk of compromising his own safety. But Ahmed refused to allow it. He had been sent into Delhi to help the doctor, and could not consent to anything that would endanger him. His refusal gave the khansaman evident relief. Once more the servant offered to inform Asadullah of his son's plight, and Ahmed, in declining, thought it well to explain his reasons. The khansaman scoffed at them; he did not understand such scruples; and though he did not say so, he went away with the determination to seek out the old chief the next day when he went to market.

He left with Ahmed a file with which he might so far cut his fetters as to be able to break loose if occasion offered, and he advised him to feign exhaustion at Minghal Khan's next visit. After so many hours without food even the strongest must collapse, and if the captive were still found unaltered Minghal's suspicion would certainly be aroused.

Meanwhile Minghal had been occupied with his own concerns. He had no intention of paying the fine inflicted on him, and at a private interview with the king, with the assistance of Mirza Akbar Sultan and the eloquent testimony of his own wounds, he talked the old man over, and the sentence was remitted. When this reached the ears of Rahmut Khan, the old chief was furious, and resolved to take matters into his own hands. He had not only his old quarrel with Minghal to settle: there were the two fierce attacks made upon him during the short time he had been in Delhi; there was also the attempt to betray him to the enemy. It was not Rahmut Khan's way to instigate attacks which he was not himself prepared to carry through. His men were incensed against Minghal's regiment, and that Minghal feared reprisals was shown by the fact that he had now garrisoned his house with a score of men.

Rahmut planned an attack on the house after sunset with a hundred of his followers. Their approach was spied by the darwan before they actually

reached the house. He promptly bolted the gates and ran to give the alarm. Minghal took advantage of the breathing space to beat a hasty retreat through the back entrance, and hurried to Bakht Khan with the news.

It was some time before Rahmut's men forced an entrance, so solid were the doors. They had scarcely broken in when the commander-in-chief arrived on the spot at the head of a considerable body of picked men. There was a stormy scene between him and Rahmut, who, however, could not but yield to superior force. He was more enraged than ever, especially because during the short time they had been in the house his men had gained little plunder, all the valuables having been sold to supply the wants of Minghal Khan. The old chief was led away under arrest, and carried straight to the palace. The king was in no mood to overlook this direct transgression. All day he had been harassed by reports of the ill-treatment of residents by the sepoys. It was intolerable, he cried, that his peaceable subjects should be harassed and threatened by soldiers who had come to the city with the avowed object of destroying the English. Still more intolerable was it that the soldiers should attack one another.

"I see clearly," said the wretched monarch, "that the English will take the city, and kill me."

"Be of good cheer, illustrious one," said one of his officers. "Do thou put thy hand on our heads, and without doubt we shall be victorious."

And then, to the number of a hundred and fifty, they filed past him, and as he placed his hand on the head of each he said, "Go thou with haste and win victory on the Ridge." And they begged him to lay a severe penalty on this Pathan stranger, Asadullah, who had come to trouble the city. Then up spoke Bakht Khan, ever blunt of address.

"Punish Asadullah," he said, "it is but right; but punish Minghal also. They are arrows of one quiver. The Arab horse gets whipped and the Tartar is fondled. I am weary of Minghal Khan."

But the covetous officials knew that Minghal was poor, whereas rumour ascribed to Asadullah the possession of great treasures of plunder. The treasury was empty. That very day a message came from Gwalior to the effect that the whole army there was willing to place itself at the king's

service, and he petulantly made answer: "I say there is no money for their support. We have here in the city 60,000 men, but they have not been able to win one clod of dirt from the English." The opportunity of gaining something for the treasury was too good to be thrown away. At the instance of his sycophants the king demanded a heavy fine from Rahmut. The chief, curbing his wrath, begged until morning to get the money. Before morning dawned, he had his men saddled up, and the moment the gates were opened he dashed through the streets at the head of his force, rode out by the Ajmir gate, and fled away into the open country. Before the news reached the palace, before any one could think of pursuit, the old Pathan was out of sight.

Night being as day to Ahmed in his dungeon, he set to work at once with the file the khansaman had given him. The links of his chain were of soft iron, and with ready wit he thought of a way by which he might for a time disguise the fact that his fetters were loosed. He filed through one of the links, and then a portion of the next one, until he was able to pass this thinned portion through the gap he had made in the first. If, therefore, he should be suddenly disturbed, he could at once replace the links, and, by turning one of them round so that the portion yet unfiled was brought against the part that was cut, the chain might appear to be still unbroken.

As soon as he was free he made a tour around his dungeon, rather by way of distraction and to stretch his legs than with any idea of making a discovery that would further his escape.

The vault was pitch dark. He had seen it by the light of the oil-lamp during the visits of Minghal and the khansaman, but taken no particular note of it. He now went round it, feeling the walls with his hands. They were of rough-hewn stones; there was no variation except at the door. He shook that: it was locked fast. He went back to the staple and sat down; after a time, having nothing better to do, he started again, and examined the door by touch more carefully. There was no handle, not even a keyhole on the inside. Thinking he heard footsteps, he retreated so hastily that he narrowly escaped overturning the pitcher of water. It was a false alarm. Once more he went round the walls, this time in the opposite direction.

And now, as he drew his hand along the wall, he fancied that one of the slabs of stone protruded a little further into the room than the others. All the stones were rough and ill-fitting, but this protuberance awoke his curiosity. Had he detected a slight movement as he first pressed it? He pushed hard at it—upwards, downwards, sideways, but without result. Surely he had been mistaken. He would try again. This time he pushed gently, and thrilled all through when he felt an indubitable movement, though very slight. Now, instead of pushing, he pulled outward. The stone yielded. He pulled harder; it moved reluctantly, but it did move, and by and by he was able to get his fingers round the edge of the slab. Another pull, and it came a few inches from the wall, then stopped.

He was puzzled. He pushed at the stonework immediately around the slab. There was no result. He tried a few feet to the right—in vain; then to the left. Something seemed to give slightly. A harder push, and the slab moved inward, slowly revolving on a vertical axis until it stood perpendicular to the surface of the wall.

With beating heart he crawled through the opening, and found himself in a stone passage, so low that he had to stoop, so narrow that there was not an inch to spare on either side. In a dozen paces he reached the end—a dead stone wall. There must be an outlet, but where? He felt over the wall and discovered a protuberance similar to that in the room he had left. He pushed and pulled in the same way; the slab moved; a light shone through the crack between it and the wall. He peeped through. There was Craddock Sahib reading at his little table by the light of a lamp.

The doctor was amazed, delighted, perplexed, at once. Ahmed rapidly explained the discovery he had made, then hurried back through the passage, closed the slab opening into his cell, and returned. He learnt from the doctor of the recent attack on the house by Asadullah, and that the khansaman, in spite of his wishes to the contrary, had gone off that morning to find the old chief, and inform him of his son's plight. Ahmed seized on the attack as affording an explanation of his escape. Minghal would believe readily enough that the prisoner had been rescued by his father, even though the fact that the door was still locked should savour of mystery. Thus the khansaman would be in no danger of dismissal.

The question was: how was Ahmed to escape from the house and the city? There was no longer any safety in his disguise, even if the khansaman could procure a beard to replace that of which Minghal had stripped him. It was the khansaman himself who, when he returned, suggested a way. Sepoys' uniforms were easily to be got; he would obtain one at his next visit to the bazar; clad in that and provided with arms, Ahmed must march out with a mutinous regiment and take an opportunity of escaping from them. He would, it was true, run the risk of being shot himself as a rebel; but among risks there was little to choose. The khansaman would acquaint him with a favourable time for making the attempt.

Ahmed remained for several days in the doctor's company. They heard from the khansaman of Minghal's fury when he discovered the disappearance of his prisoner. As Ahmed had guessed, he imputed it to the agency of Rahmut Khan, and regarded the locked door merely as an additional proof of the malicious cunning of the old chief. At last the uniform and the arms were provided, and one morning very early, before the household was astir, Ahmed was cautiously let out of the house by the khansaman. A few hours later he joined himself unquestioned to a body of troops made up of many different components, ordered to reinforce the mutineers holding the suburb of Kishenganj. There was some delay as they marched past the Mosque. Some one had told the king that the sepoys, clamorous for pay, were about to attack him in his palace, and orders were sent through the city that not a soldier should move until the report had been investigated.

While the soldiers stood at ease near the Mosque, Ahmed noticed Fazl Hak moving leisurely among the onlookers, occasionally addressing a word or two to the sepoys he passed. As he came near, Ahmed accosted him.

"Salaam, worthy maulavi, what is the news?"

Fazl Hak stopped; he looked surprised, then took Ahmed a little apart.

"There is no news, sepoy," he said in a low tone, "later than this command of the king."

"Hast thou not heard of the fifteen elephants taken from the English yesterday?"

"Nay, I had not heard of that."

"Hai! that is strange. Nor that a fakir departed from the city yesterday to travel to Peshawar, and cut the throat of Jan Larrens?"

"Sayest thou?"

"Nor that a black-bearded banijara selling shawls was lately stripped of his beard and shown to be as smooth of cheek as I myself—a wretched spy of the Feringhis?"

"Hai! I know of such a banijara, and I could have said he would prove but a broken reed as a spy."

"And dost thou not know that our great Bakht Khan has driven a hundred mines beneath the Ridge, and when the moon is full the Feringhis will all be blown to little pieces?"

Fazl Hak threw a keen sidelong look at this informative sepoy.

"Though I would not counsel thee to write word of that on thy little scrolls to Hodson Sahib," added Ahmed, lowering his voice to a whisper.

The maulavi started; an angry flush suffused his cheeks.

"Thou misbegotten son of——!" he exclaimed; but Ahmed interrupted him.

"Let it be peace, good maulavi," he said. "There is little thou dost not know; thou knowest now that the Pathan trader was not such a sorry spy, since I am he. It is pardonable for a man to prove himself, to one of such honoured merit as thou."

"Thou sayest well," said the maulavi, somewhat mollified. "When the troubles are over, come to me; I will pay thee well."

"Nay, I have other service. But if thou hast aught now that thou wouldst send to Hodson Sahib, deliver it to me; I go to him."

Without hesitation Fazl Hak took from beneath his thumbnail a tiny scroll of paper, which he handed secretly to Ahmed, and then with a negligent salutation he walked slowly away.

Ahmed's conversation with the maulavi attracted little attention among the sepoys. And when, after a delay of two hours, the order came to march, he

went with them out from the Ajmir gate, and into Kishenganj.

At dead of night he crept out very stealthily, stole along the tree-shaded road until he reached the Jumna canal, then stripped off his tell-tale red coat, and swam across. Hastening along the further bank for half-a-mile, he struck northward through the gardens on the outskirts of Sabzi Mandi, and just before dawn reached a picket of Irregular Native Cavalry. Half-an-hour later he was in Hodson's tent, relating his discovery of Craddock Sahib, and much more that Hodson regarded as of greater importance.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH

Nikalsain

Ahmed's return to the corps set his comrades' tongues wagging.

"Why, where hast thou been, Ahmed-ji?" cried Sherdil, when they met. "Verily the sight of thee is as ointment to sore eyes."

There was now no reason why the men should not know the errand on which he had been, saving such particulars as were confidential with Hodson Sahib. So Ahmed related to Sherdil and a group of Guides his adventures since he had first left them. Two facts he omitted: his disguise, and his share in the fight with the rebels as they returned from Alipur. The men listened with amazement, and Sherdil frankly declared his envy.

"Though Allah has been good to me too," he added; "am I not now a dafadar? He who has patience wins. Thou canst not now be a dafadar before me."

Ahmed congratulated him warmly on his promotion. Then he asked what the Guides had been doing during his absence, and heard of almost daily encounters with the enemy. He learnt also that Hodson Sahib was no longer in command of the corps. He had raised a new body of horsemen, of whom the Guides were somewhat jealous.

"There goes one of them," cried Sherdil, pointing to a tall figure in khaki, with a scarlet sash over the shoulder and a huge scarlet turban. "We call them flamingoes, for they are very like. Thou shouldst see them on horseback, some of them who have ridden little; it is a sight to make you crack your sides."

"And who is now our commander, then?"

"Shebbeare Sahib, a good man: has he not been twice wounded? But it seems as though our commanders change with the moon, so short a time do they abide with us."

And then he told of what men had been killed, and what wounded. He himself had been incapacitated for a week through a sabre cut. Ahmed asked if any new men had joined the corps.

"None, though there was a man of good promise who came with us into that fight I told you of towards Alipur; a silent man, with a noble beard. Some of us thought he was a candidate; some, a sahib—thou knowest how the sahibs love strange adventures; but I have never looked upon him since."

"Of what sort was he, Sherdil?"

"A straight man, with a grave face, and a good seat on horseback."

"Was he anything like me?"

"Hai! Thou art a stripling: he was a *man*, I say. Maybe if thou live long enough thou wilt have a beard like his. Truly thou wouldst have rejoiced to see him that day. Did he not smite, Rasul? Did he not cleave his way through the Purbiyas with clean thrust and stroke? I would fain look on him again."

"Thou hast seen him this day, Sherdil."

"Sayest thou? Where? I knew it not."

"Thou seest him now."

Sherdil stared.

"Dost thou not remember how thou didst thyself give me a moustache that day we went as traders to Mandan? Even so I got for myself the beard, in Karnal."

The men laughed, and chaffed Sherdil uproariously on his failure to recognize his prize pupil.

"Wah!" cried the new dafadar; "but those who said the man was a sahib ——"

He stopped, checked by a look from Ahmed. Then they talked of the prospects of the siege, and the merits of the new general, Archdale Wilson, who had succeeded General Reed. In common with the rest of the little

force on the Ridge, they were restive under the long delay in assaulting the rebel city.

"But we shall see something soon," said Sherdil. "Nikalsain is here."

"Who is Nikalsain?"

"Dost thou not know Nikalsain? Wah! He is a man! There is not one in the hills that does not shiver in his pyjamas when he hears the name of Nikalsain. Thou couldst hear the ring of his grey mare's hoofs from Attock even to the Khaibar, and the folk of Rawal Pindi wake in the night and tremble, saying they hear the tramp of Nikalsain's war-horse. There are many sahibs, but only one Nikalsain."

"Hast thou not heard of what he did to Alladad Khan?" asked one of the men.

"Tell it, good Rasul," said Ahmed.

"Why, Alladad Khan, being guardian to his nephew—a boy—seized upon his inheritance and drove him from the village. By and by, when the boy's beard was grown, he went to Nikalsain and besought him that he would do him right. But Alladad was a great man, and mightily feared, so that when Nikalsain sent to his village to seek witnesses of the truth of the matter, no man durst for his life speak for the boy. One morn, ere the sun was up, a man of the village went forth to his fields, and lo! there was Nikalsain's grey mare grazing just beyond the gate. The man shook with amaze and fear, and when his trembling had ceased, ran back again to tell Alladad Khan. And soon all the men of the village flocked to the gate to see the sight, and they marvelled greatly. Alladad also was in dread, for his conscience pricked him, and he bade some to drive the mare to the grass of some other village, lest evil should come upon them. And as they went forth to do his bidding, in a little space they came to a tree, and lo! tied to it, was Nikalsain himself. Some fled away in great fear; others, thinking to win favour with the hazur, went forward to loose him. But Nikalsain cried to them in a loud voice—verily his voice is like thunder—and bade them stand and say on whose land they were. In their fear none could speak, but they lifted their fingers and pointed to Alladad Khan, and he came out from among them with trembling knees and said in haste: 'Nay, hazur, the land is

not mine, but my nephew's.' Then Nikalsain bade him swear by the Prophet that what he said was true, and when Alladad had sworn, the hazur permitted the cords to be loosed. And next day in his court he decreed that the nephew should receive his inheritance, since his uncle had sworn it was his; and Alladad, shamefaced at the manner of his discomfiture, and at the laughter of the people, went straightway on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and the place knew him no more."

"Nikalsain is just, and very terrible," said Sherdil.

"Is he not like one of the heroes of old? A tall man, with a face as grave as a mullah's, and a black beard thicker than mine, and he holds his head high in the air as if he scorned to see the ground. Jan Larrens sent him to us; his troops are yet on the way; and when they come there will be hot work in the gates of Delhi."

A few days later Nicholson rode out to meet the movable column of which he was in command, and which had been raised by the energy of John Lawrence in the Panjab. It was an inspiriting sight when, on the fourteenth of August, the column, 3,000 strong, British and natives, marched into camp behind their stately leader, amid the blare of bands and the cheers of the weary holders of the Ridge. Their arrival infused the hearts of the besiegers with new courage and cheerfulness; every man, from the general down to the meanest bhisti, hailed Nicholson's coming as the beginning of the end.

About three weeks before, the siege-train for which General Wilson had been for weeks anxiously waiting, left Firozpur. It stretched for five miles along the Great Trunk Road, and was furnished with an inconsiderable escort. On the twenty-fourth of August, General Wilson learnt that a large force of rebels, with sixteen guns, had left Delhi for Najafgarh, with the object of intercepting the siege-train and cutting off supplies from the Ridge. Nicholson, ever eager for active work, was given the task of dealing with the mutineers.

Early on the morning of August 25, in pouring rain, Nicholson left camp at the head of two thousand five hundred men, consisting of horse and foot, British and native, and three troops of horse artillery under Major Tombs. To their great delight, Sherdil and Ahmed were among the squadron of

Guides that formed part of the force. The march reminded them of the former expedition to Alipur. For nine miles they struggled through swamp and quagmire, the mud so deep that the guns often sank up to the axles and stuck fast, the rain falling in torrents all the time. Some of the artillery officers despaired of getting their guns through, but when they saw Nicholson's great form riding steadily on as if nothing was the matter, they took courage, feeling sure that all was right. A short halt was made at the village of Nanghir, and while the troops were resting, two officers rode forward to reconnoitre a nullah that crossed the road about five miles away. They found that a crossing was practicable, and from its bank they descried the enemy's outposts.

It was five o'clock before the column had forded the nullah, under fire of the rebels. Darkness would soon fall, and if the enemy was to be routed no time could be lost. Nicholson himself rode forward to reconnoitre their position. It extended for two miles, from the town of Najafgarh on the left to the bridge over the Najafgarh canal on the right. The strongest point was an old serai at their left centre, where they had four guns; nine other guns lay between this and the bridge. This serai he resolved to attack with his infantry, the guns covering the flanks, and the 9th Lancers and Guides to support the line.

As soon as the line was formed, Nicholson ordered the infantry to lie down while the guns made an attempt to silence those of the enemy. He rode along the line, addressing each regiment in turn, aptly suiting his words to what he knew of their previous achievements in war. One order he gave to them all: to reserve their fire until they came within forty yards of the serai, then to pour in one volley and charge home.

The bugles sounded the advance. The eager men—British riflemen, Bengal fusiliers, Panjab infantry—sprang to their feet with a cheer, and followed Nicholson amid a storm of shot over the oozy swamp that divided them from the enemy. They reached the serai, dashed into it, swept the defenders away, and seized the guns, the sepoys resisting with the desperate bravery they almost always displayed behind defences. The serai cleared, the cheering infantry formed up on the left, and with irresistible dash fell on the rebels as they fled toward the canal bridge in mad haste to save their guns.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Lumsden, brother of Lumsden of the Guides, had driven the enemy out of Najafgarh itself. But just as the sun was setting on the brief battle, Nicholson learnt that a band of mutineers had halted in a cluster of houses between the serai and the canal. Determined not to leave his victory incomplete, he ordered Lumsden to drive them out at the point of the bayonet. The Panjabis followed their gallant leader into the hamlet; but the rebels were well defended, and fought with the stubborn valour of despair. Lumsden fell, shot through the heart; many of his men were killed with him; and it was not until the 61st Foot came up that the last position was won.

This was the only shadow on the brilliance of the victory. Nicholson had routed a force of trained sepoys, double the number of his own men, after a long day's march in the worst of conditions. He had captured twelve of their sixteen guns, and all their stores and baggage. Their slaughter had been great; the demoralized survivors were in full flight for Delhi. On the British side, the casualties were less than a hundred killed and wounded.

The troops bivouacked on the field. Sherdil, lying that night beside Ahmed on a horse-rug, said—

"What will happen to thee, Ahmed-ji, when the city is taken?"

"What indeed, save that I go back with thee and the Guides to Hoti-Mardan!"

"But that cannot be the end of things for thee. Thou art of the sahibs: the secret cannot be kept for ever. The Guides notice something in thee that is different from the rest, and they ask me about it, and I tell them thou art the son of a chief; but they are not satisfied. Dost thou not yearn to be among thy true people?"

"What wouldst thou, Sherdil? I have had such thoughts, but now that I have seen the sahibs, who am I that I should claim kinship with them? I cannot speak their speech; I know nothing of their learning. It were better, maybe, to remain a Guide and in due time become a dafadar like thee; and then some day go back to Shagpur, and do unto that fat Dilasah as he deserves. I came thence to win freedom for my father; and he is now free, and needs

not my help. Him I know, and his people; among the sahibs I am but as an ignorant little child."

"Thou sayest true; yet a stone does not rot in water, and though thou remain among Pathans a thousand years thou wilt never be other than a sahib. Well, what must be, will be. Small rain fills a pond: peradventure when thou hast been a little longer with the sahibs the cup of thy desire will run over."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH

The Storming of Delhi

Nicholson's victory at Najafgarh encouraged the little army on the Ridge as much as it dismayed the enemy. The former needed encouragement. More than a thousand Englishmen were in hospital. General Wilson was anxious and depressed; urged on the one side by Lawrence to strike a blow and save India, on the other fearing to risk an assault which, if it failed, would mean annihilation or at best ignominious retirement. But Nicholson inspired officers and men with confidence. The sight of his great form stalking or riding day after day from end to end of the position, made men feel that when the long-expected siege-train arrived no time would be lost in putting all to the hazard. He went carefully over the ground, deciding with Baird Smith, the head of the Engineers, the sites for the breaching batteries, arranging the composition and disposition of the attacking columns, gaining all possible information about affairs in the city.

In Delhi, meanwhile, it was beginning to be felt that the hour of retribution was at hand. The dissensions between the rival commanders became more acute; one day the king would refuse to see Bakht Khan, holding that he had disgraced himself; the next he would shower compliments on him and assure him of his continued good favour. The army still complained of lack of pay; the princes still plundered the bankers and merchants; the whole city was in a state of terror. Day by day sepoys deserted, going away unarmed to seek their homes. Yet when a postal-runner from the Ridge fell into the rebels' hands, and, being questioned in the king's presence as to what was going on in the camp, declared that the sepoys would never prevail against the English, his outspoken opinion enraged the courtiers, and they sentenced him to death.

At last, on September 4, the siege-train arrived, a long line of heavy guns and mortars drawn by elephants, with miles of bullock-carts loaded with shot and shell and ammunition of all kinds, enough to grind Delhi to powder. During the next week all energies were strained to make ready for

the assault. Nicholson and Baird Smith had settled the plan. The most vulnerable part of the wall lay between the Water gate and the Mori bastion. Upon this it was decided to concentrate the artillery fire. On the night of September 6, the first battery was begun just below the Sami-house, a half-ruined mosque six hundred yards from the city, and next day, when it was completed and began to belch its shot on the doomed walls, strong pickets took advantage of the distraction to occupy Ludlow Castle, a large country-house of European make towards the left of the position, and the Kudsia gardens opposite the Kashmir gate and overlooking the river. Each night a new battery was erected and armed, to begin each morning its fierce work. The second battery stood in front of Ludlow Castle, five hundred yards from the walls; the third, consisting of four heavy mortars, was made in the Kudsia gardens, and placed in command of the gallant Major Tombs; the fourth, a triumph of the daring and skill of Captain Taylor of the Engineers, had crept within a hundred and sixty yards of the Mori bastion. Nor were these feats of engineering done without loss. As soon as the rebels perceived what was afoot, they directed a storm of musketry on the heroic workers who toiled day and night in the hot moist air. British and natives, officers and men, soldiers of all arms—for Lancers and Carabineers lent a hand in the work—laboured incessantly with unflinching courage. As soon as one man was killed or disabled, another took his place.

By the night of the 11th, all the batteries were complete, and on the 12th more than fifty guns and mortars were pounding the walls. The din was deafening, and mingled with the roar of the guns was the crash of shattered masonry as the red walls crumbled away. At nightfall every post of vantage on the Ridge was crowded with sightseers, watching the living shell flying through the air like falling meteors. The rebels at first attempted to answer the fire, but the gunners could not hold their posts on the shot-swept ramparts. Parties of rebel horse sallied forth from time to time, as if to charge the batteries; but they were met by showers of grape-shot, or set upon by troops of Hodson's Horse, which drove them back in frantic haste to find cover. Nicholson rode from battery to battery, encouraging the men, taking counsel with Baird Smith, watching the effect of these tremendous salvos that shook the ground.

So the bombardment continued until the night of the 13th. Then the roar suddenly ceased. A thrill of expectation ran through the camp. Captain

Taylor had reported that the breaches in the walls were practicable; every man knew that the moment for the great assault was at hand. And in the city men knew it too. The old king spent many hours in his private mosque praying for victory. The traders had all closed their shops, for fear of being carried off to serve at the fortifications. The officers wrangled; there was no commanding spirit like Nicholson among them. Bakht Khan was brave enough, but he was merely a fighter; he had no genius for leadership. On the night of the 12th a proclamation was carried with beat of drum through the streets, commanding all the men of the city, Hindu and Mohammedan alike, to assemble at the Kashmir gate, bringing picks and shovels; the king himself would lead them forth, and they would fall on the infidels and sweep them away. The Hindus paid no heed; but ten thousand faithful Mohammedans, inflamed with fanatic ardour, their religious feelings wrought upon by shrieking fakirs and mullahs, congregated at the gates waiting the arrival of their king. But he came not. Till midnight they remained; then hope died away, and with despairing hearts the great throng dispersed to their homes.

On the night of the 13th, ere the bombardment ceased, every available man in the British force, including men just risen from their sick beds in the hospital, went to his appointed station. The assault was to be made in four columns. A thousand men,—detachments from the 1st Fusiliers, the 15th Regiment, and the 2nd Panjab Infantry—under Nicholson himself, were to storm the breach in the Kashmir bastion, and escalade the walls. The second column, also a thousand strong, under Colonel Jones of the 61st, was simultaneously to storm and scale the Mori bastion. Meanwhile the Kashmir gate was to be blown up, and the third column, under Colonel Campbell of the 52nd, would sweep in through the breach. The fourth column, commanded by Major Reid, who had gallantly held Hindu Rao's house throughout the summer, was to attack the suburb of Kishenganj and enter by the Lahore gate. A fifth column, of 1,500 men, was held in reserve to give support to the first, and Colonel Hope Grant was to post himself on the Ridge, with the cavalry six hundred strong, to prevent the rebels from re-entering the city when thrust out of Kishenganj. The whole force consisted of some 7,000 men.

Ahmed had been looking forward with great eagerness to the fight. The Guides' cavalry, commanded now by Captain Sandford, formed part of

Hope Grant's brigade, and they expected warm work at Kishenganj when Major Reid had driven the rebels into the open. But on the evening of the 13th Ahmed was summoned to Nicholson's tent, and learnt, with mingled pride and disappointment, that he was to accompany the first column. When the troops entered the city they would require a guide through its network of streets and lanes, and Hodson had recommended Ahmed for the duty. He was proud at being selected to serve Nicholson, but at the same time disappointed that he was not to go side by side with Sherdil into the fight. Sherdil himself was envious.

"In very truth thou art favoured above all men," he said. "I myself would fain serve the great Nikalsain."

"But thou dost not know Delhi, Sherdil-ji," replied Ahmed.

"True, but by often asking one can find the way. Wah! I will nevertheless fight as befits one of my name, and I promise thee that when the day is done the Purbiyas shall lie around me like grass from the scythe."

Dawn was just breaking on that sultry September 14, when the bugle sounded the advance. The Rifles led the way in skirmishing order; the first column, with Nicholson ahead, marched on steadily until they reached the edge of the jungle. Then the Engineers and the storming party, with their ladders, rose from cover, and sprang forward to the breach near the Kashmir bastion. A storm of musket-shots assailed them as they gained the crest of the glacis; scores of men fell; but the survivors let down their ladders, the British officers ran down them into the ditch, the men close behind, and with a great cheer they rushed up the scarp and into the breach. The sight of their gleaming bayonets was too much for the sepoys. They fled, and Nicholson led his men into Delhi.

Meanwhile, at the Mori bastion, Colonel Jones had been met by a tremendous fusillade that mowed down three-fourths of his ladder-men, and a great number of his storming party. But while his men were still struggling with the ladder, twenty-five of the 8th Foot slid into the ditch, and scrambled up into the breach at a point where attack had not been expected. The rebels were taken aback; Jones seized the moment of hesitation, and in a few minutes the rest of his column were upon the ramparts. They swept on towards the Kabul gate, driving the enemy before

them, and a wild whoop rose from the panting men as they saw their flag planted on the summit of the gate.

The progress of the third column had been marked by an act of heroism. The Kashmir gate must be blown open before they could enter. Home, a subaltern of the Engineers, with two British sergeants and a dozen natives, ran forward to the gate under a heavy fire, carrying twenty-five pound powder-bags. A step or two behind came Lieutenant Salkeld with a firing party and a bugler. They ran across the ditch by the planks of the drawbridge, and came unscathed to the foot of the great double gates, the rebels seeming to be scared into inaction by the very audacity of the feat. They laid the bags against the gate; then a terrible fire was again directed upon them. A sergeant fell dead; Home dropped unhurt into the ditch; Salkeld, holding the portfire, was shot through arm and leg, and fell back helpless. He handed the portfire to Corporal Burgess, who was shot dead before he could light the fuse. Carmichael took the portfire and had just lighted the fuse, when he received a mortal wound. Smith, fearing that Carmichael had failed, sprang forward, match-box in hand; but the portfire exploded just as he reached the gate, and he plunged into the ditch to escape the greater explosion. Next moment the gate was shattered to fragments. Now was the bugler's turn. Three times he sounded the advance, but amid the din all around it was not heard. The explosion itself, however, gave the signal, and Colonel Campbell led his men forward at the double, and dashed into the city but a few minutes after the first and second columns had entered it.

The fourth column had meanwhile suffered a disastrous check. The guns which were to accompany it were late in arriving, and when they did come, the gunners were only sufficient to work one out of the four. Major Reid was waiting until others could be found, when he heard the explosion at the Kashmir gate and learnt that a portion of his native troops were already engaged at the Idgah. It was time to be up and doing, so he set off to the attack of Kishenganj, leaving his guns behind. But a musket-ball struck him on the head, and he fell insensible into the ditch. There was some disorder among the men, and a doubt as to who was now in command of the column; and when Reid settled that, on returning to consciousness, by ordering Captain Lawrence to take the command, the fire of artillery and musketry from the unbreached walls of Kishenganj was so heavy as to necessitate the

withdrawal of the column to their starting-place at Hindu Rao's house. Hope Grant's cavalry, drawn up to guard their flank when they pressed forward to the city, as had been the intention, were forced to sit their horses for two long hours without a chance of doing anything, under a hurricane of lead and iron from the Burn bastion. Only a third of them were British, but the troopers of the Guides and Hodson's Horse behaved as steadily under this critical ordeal as the British Lancers. In the excitement of action men may face lightheartedly dangers to which they are oblivious: it needs more heroism to sit like sentries at the Horse Guards while balls are flying thick around. By and by they were helped to hold their ground by Captain Bourchier's battery of horse artillery. And not till they learnt that the three storming columns had entered the city, and established themselves there, did they fall back to their bivouac around Ludlow Castle.

In the city the ramparts were in British hands, from the Kashmir gate to the Kabul gate, and Colonel Campbell had pushed on across the Chandni Chauk, and as far as the great mosque, which had been fortified. From it and the surrounding houses a deadly fire was poured upon the British, and Campbell, finding that the support he had expected from the other columns was not forthcoming, fell back upon the Begam Bagh, a vast walled garden, where he bivouacked.

Meanwhile, Nicholson had pressed on along the foot of the walls towards the Kabul gate, where British colours now flew. The plan had been to clear the ramparts as far westward as the Lahore gate, and Nicholson expected that Major Reid's column would by this time have entered the city there. Nothing daunted by Reid's failure, Nicholson determined to push forward without this support.

Between the Kabul and the Lahore gates was the Burn bastion, the strongest part of the defences, whence a galling fire was being kept up both on the cavalry drawn up outside and on the infantry in the narrow streets within. A narrow lane, three hundred yards long, and varying from ten feet to three in width, ran between the Kabul gate and the bastion, lined with mud huts on one side and on the other by the ramparts. The rebels, taking heart at the one success they had achieved in the repulse of the fourth column and the havoc wrought by the Burn bastion, had come crowding back into the lane,

the further end of which they defended with two brass guns posted behind a bullet-proof screen.

Nicholson knew that his task would not be finished until the bastion was taken. The enemy would exult if it remained even for a day in their hands. So he called on the 1st Fusiliers to charge along the lane, ordering the 75th to rush along the ramparts and carry the position above. The men, tired as they were, gallantly responded. On they went, reached the first gun, overwhelmed the gunners, then dashed on with a cheer to the second. But ere they reached it a storm of shot—musket-balls, grape, canister, round shot, even stones flung by hand—burst upon them. They recoiled. Again they formed up, again charged up the lane, again captured the first gun, which Captain Greville spiked. Once more they dashed forward to the second gun and the bullet-proof screen. Men fell fast, blocking the narrow lane. Major Jacob, of the 1st Fusiliers, and six other officers were struck down, and Captain Greville was withdrawing the men from what he deemed an impossible task.

But at this moment the great voice of Nicholson himself was heard calling on the men to make one more charge and follow him. He rushed to the front, and turned his back for a moment to the enemy, so that his men might see his face and take courage. A shot from the bastion struck him in the back; he reeled and fell. A sergeant caught him, and laid him in one of the recesses below the ramparts. He was taken back to the Kabul gate, and by and by was placed in a dooli and entrusted to native bearers to carry to the field hospital below the Ridge.

Lieutenant Frederick Roberts, an engineer on General Wilson's staff, had been sent into the city to discover the truth of reports carried to him—that Nicholson had fallen, and Hope Grant and Tombs were both dead. As he rode through the Kashmir gate, Lieutenant Roberts saw a dooli by the roadside with a wounded man in it, but no bearers. The lieutenant dismounted to see what he could do. He found that the wounded man was John Nicholson, deserted by the bearers, lying in helpless agony alone. The bearers had run off to plunder. Four men were found to supply their places; a sergeant of the 61st Foot was put in charge of the party, and the dying soldier was carried to Captain Daly's tent on the Ridge.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SIXTH

Eighty to One

Ahmed entered the city with the first column. When, however, Nicholson decided to work along the ramparts and leave Colonel Jones and the second column to push forward into the streets, he ordered Ahmed to act as guide to the colonel. Ahmed led the way through the streets by which he had come on the night when he dropped over the wall. The victorious troops swept them clear of mutineers, but their progress was slow, because the men could not be restrained from plundering as they went.

In due time they reached the great mosque, whence, after waiting vainly for the arrival of the fourth column, Colonel Jones decided to retire to the Begam Bagh. It happened as the troops withdrew, that a determined rush of mutineers down the street in which Dr. Craddock's house was situated, cut off Ahmed and a small group of men from the main body. To force their way through the enemy was impossible without great loss, and Ahmed, perceiving that the little party was in danger of annihilation, led them at the double into the lane that ran behind the doctor's house, to take refuge there until the way was clear. They were only just in time. They scaled the wall of the garden by mounting upon one another's shoulders; and the last four or five were only saved from the mutineers, who came dashing along in pursuit, by the fire of their comrades who had already gained the top of the wall. In the temporary check the last men were hauled up, and dropped safely into the garden.

The group numbered fifteen besides Ahmed, thirteen being sepoys of the 4th Sikh Infantry, and two corporals of the 2nd Fusiliers. It was clear that they would by and by be no better than rats in a trap unless they found shelter in the house, and Ahmed, rapidly explaining to a native sergeant that he knew the place, made a dash with half the party past the fountain to the back door, leaving the rest to deal with any of the enemy who should attempt to drop into the garden as they themselves had done.

Just as he reached the door, happening to glance up at a small window overlooking the garden, he saw the face of Minghal Khan. Next moment he had disappeared. The door was open. Ahmed rushed in, and up the stairs, followed by the men. He reached the landing only to see the darwan leaping down the front staircase. Running along after him, Ahmed looked over. A shot grazed his ear: the darwan had turned at the bottom and fired. Ahmed sprang down five steps at a time, there was a hurry-scurry below, and by the time he arrived at the compound three or four figures were hastening through the front gate, which they shut behind them with a bang.

Ahmed had no idea of pursuing them. He barred the gate, ran back to the men he had left, who had followed him from the house, and went upstairs again, with the intention of passing through the almirah and assuring himself that the doctor was safe. In the surgery he was amazed to see both the doctor and the khansaman, laid on the floor and securely bound. In a moment he cut their bonds.

"Allah is good!" cried the khansaman. "I have even now suffered grievous pangs, and but for thee the sahib would have suffered also."

"How comes this?" asked Ahmed.

"I had taken food to the sahib when Minghal Khan and the darwan came to us with a sepoy: without doubt the darwan had spied me entering the wall. They were armed: the sahib had his pistol, but it is useless striving against fate. We should have been slain, and I bethought myself that the sahibs are in the city, and perchance if we were spared they could save us. While there is life there is hope. And we were bound, and Minghal Khan had us carried here, and demanded to know the place where the sahib's treasure is concealed. Hai! what treasure have we! He had tortured me to loose my tongue, and would have done the same to the sahib but that thou camest. Truly Allah is great!"

"Have we taken the city?" asked the doctor.

"We have entered, sahib, and Nikalsain is here; but there is still much to do, and I heard it said that Reid Sahib has been checked, and the Lahore gate is still to be won."

"Well, then, we must hold this house until the rebels are driven away," said the doctor; "it will be a hard task for us three."

"There are men with me, sahib," said Ahmed. "We make about a score in all."

"Then we can do it. What men are they?"

"Some Sikhs, sahib, and two Englishmen."

"It could not be better. Go and see what can be done to put the house in a state of defence, and come to me here. I am still too weak to do very much, I fear; but I can advise, and the men will obey me."

Ahmed hastened away with the khansaman. In the dining-room they found several large bales of goods ready packed: Minghal had evidently prepared for the inevitable. It was clear, in spite of his professed poverty, that he had managed to amass a good deal of plunder, and he had apparently only delayed with the prospect of adding to his store the treasure which he believed the doctor had concealed in the house. There were two pistols on a shelf: he had not had time to snatch them up as he fled. And in the passage Ahmed discovered a musket and ammunition left behind by one of Minghal's men in the hurry of departure. With these latter Ahmed armed the khansaman, who like most Mohammedans had some knowledge of the gun. The pistols would form an excellent reserve in case of fighting at close quarters.

Ahmed did not suppose that Minghal had gone for good. With three-parts of the city still in the hands of the mutineers there would be no lack of men to help him recover the house that held not only his enemy, but all his property and, as he believed, a hoard of treasure also. Ahmed was considering how best to prepare for a fierce assault when he heard loud shouts from below. Running to the window from which Minghal had looked down on the garden, he saw that several of the enemy had mounted the wall, on the roof of the colonnade, and that some had dropped to the ground on the inner side. But he saw in the same moment that there was no reason for anxiety as to the safety of the back of the house. There was a crowd of about thirty or forty men in the lane outside, but only about half-a-dozen had had the courage to make the escalade of the wall. If the assault had been at all

general, the little party inside the garden would have stood no chance; but dropping one by one, and at irregular intervals, within easy reach of the men underneath the colonnade, the besiegers had but a short shrift. Before he could recover himself each man was beset by the man nearest to him, who dashed from beneath the cover of the colonnade and attacked him with his sword. The defenders wisely reserved their ammunition. A man dropping from a height required a fraction of a second to recover himself. In each case, before recovery was possible, one or other of the men had cut his victim down.

Seeing the fate of their companions, the men on the top of the colonnade hesitated to make the jump. They felt themselves, however, secure from attack, and called to their comrades in the lane to join them. A few began to scramble up, but, although the position of the men beneath the colonnade was not visible to the attackers on top, the men themselves could see their enemy through the cracks in the roof where the wood had warped. One of the Englishmen, firing upwards through the roof, disposed of a mutineer, who rolled down the slope of the colonnade into the garden. His comrades, fearing a like fate, hastily vacated the roof and dropped down into the lane, dashing the new-found courage of the men who were about to join them.

Ahmed ran back to the doctor to inform him of what he had seen.

"Post two men at the window, and let them fire whenever a sepoy shows himself," said the doctor.

The khansaman and one of the Sikhs took up their position at the window. Sped by a few well-directed shots, the enemy either evacuated the lane or took shelter immediately beneath the wall, where they were secure.

Meanwhile, as was soon apparent, they had sent off for reinforcements to root out this little island of the Feringhis in the middle of an as yet unconquered locality. The sound of firing could still be heard in the distance, but Ahmed and his companions realized that they were cut off by several hundred yards of streets and houses from Colonel Jones' column, which indeed had by this time probably reached the Begam Bagh, and that the intervening district was without doubt swarming with mutineers. All they could hope to do was to cling to their position until the tide of attack rolled on once more, driving back the rebels, and clearing the way for a

sortie. Ahmed would have been even more anxious than he was had he known that Colonel Jones was even then deciding to fall back from the Begam Bagh to a position nearer the walls, where he intended to remain for the night.

The house was square built, slightly higher than the houses surrounding it. On each side there was a more modern residence, detached, and approaching within about twenty feet of it. There was no access to the garden from the front compound except through the house itself.

During the lull which succeeded the first check, the doctor summoned the two English corporals, and told them to consider themselves under his orders.

"All right, your honour," said one of the men. "We're jolly glad to see that one Englishman has been left alive by the Pandies."

"You don't look very strong, sir," said the other, "and don't you put yourself out. We'll give them ruffians what for."

The doctor posted six men in the front compound. There were six in the garden. Three he stationed within the house, so that they could reinforce either the front or the rear, whichever might be the more seriously pressed. Ahmed he kept with him, and when the others had taken up their positions he sent him to the roof to take stock of the surroundings.

In two or three minutes Ahmed had got all the information he required. That the enemy was on the alert he soon found by the shots that whistled about his ears as soon as he was discovered; but by standing a little way back from the parapet he was protected against any musketry fire from below. After a careful scrutiny of his surroundings he hurried below and made his report to the doctor.

"Hazur," he said in conclusion, "we cannot hold the house if the rebels come in sufficient numbers to overcome our men outside. We could not fire on them from the roof, because we should be seen above the parapet, and hit from below; and if we are seen at the windows we shall be marks for the enemy."

"Then we must set about making the house defensible. Can the parapet be loopholed?"

"Yes, sahib; the brickwork is crumbling, and with tools we could easily make loopholes."

"Get a hammer and a chisel, khansaman, and go to the roof with Ahmed Khan. Jaldi karo! Stay, give the three men below tools for making loopholes in the shutters; we may want them by and by."

The khansaman provided one of the men with an auger, and the others with pokers and other kitchen utensils, with which, made red-hot, they could bore holes through the heavy wood of the shutters. Then he followed Ahmed to the roof, where they set to work vigorously to make loopholes in the parapet.

There were still sounds of firing in the distance. At present there was no sign of an attack on the house. Knowing Minghal Khan, Ahmed suspected that he was making quite sure there was no danger of being taken in the rear before attempting an onslaught.

When his work at the parapet was finished, he went down again to the doctor, who sent him to see how the men were getting on with their task at the shutters. Three front windows on the ground floor had already been bored with two loopholes each, and without consulting the doctor he set the men to treat the shutters of the four windows at the back in the same way. The men looked at each other in surprise when he had given this order and gone.

"Who is this Pathan that gives us commands?" said one of them.

"Yea, he speaks even as the sahibs. Shall we do what one of these puffed-up Guides commands us?"

"Not I, for one," said the third man. "The sahib said the front windows; that was his order, given us by the khansaman, who is the sahib's servant. We shall be shamed if we do the bidding of a vile Pathan."

And they laid down their tools and squatted on the floor.

Ahmed meanwhile had hastened to the front door. He found it was made of extremely hard wood and thickly covered with iron studs, forming a sufficiently stout defence against anything short of a battering-ram or a cannon-shot. Coming back through the house to examine the back door and the door leading to the servants' quarters, he noticed the three Sikhs squatting in idleness.

"Dogs," he cried, "did not I say go to the back windows, and do as you did with the front? Why this idleness?"

"We obey the sahibs," said one of the men sulkily.

"Thou son of a dog, take up thy tools at once, or verily thou wilt be sorry."

Ahmed stood over the men, and his voice rang with a tone of command as authoritative as that of their own officers. The Sikh hesitated for a moment, then, to his own surprise, no less than that of his comrades, he took up his tools, rose, and went off slowly to the back of the house.

"You two follow him," said Ahmed.

And the others got up, and went without a word.

Ahmed found that the back doors were slightly made and frail. They would ill sustain a vigorous assault. So he got the doctor to give orders that a quantity of heavy furniture should be collected in the passage leading to them—material for blockading it if the doors were battered down. While perambulating the lower part of the house, he noticed some bales, containing Minghal Khan's possessions, which had been laid against the wall of the compound, in readiness for instant removal. These he carried, with the khansaman's assistance, to the upper part of the house. Then he removed all provisions—a very scanty store—from the servants' quarters, and conveyed the water-pots, filled by the bhisti that morning, to the dining-room. This done, he felt that the garrison was prepared to meet the storm.

But when he returned to the surgery, the doctor gave a further order.

"Find a long plank," he said, "as wide as the stairs—nail two together, if you cannot find one wide enough—and drive nails through it so that their points stand up."

The necessary material was soon found. When it was thickly studded with nails, the doctor bade them make a hole in it, pass a rope through the hole, and tie it to the newel of the staircase. Ahmed guessed the purpose it was designed for; for the present he laid it on its side, so that there was free passage up and down the stairs.

It was a full hour before the attack was resumed. Looking from a window, Ahmed saw the street beyond the compound thronged with rebels, some sepoys, but the majority Irregulars. Ladders were placed against the wall, and the enemy began to swarm up. There was a volley from the defenders collected at the door of the house. Several of the men who had mounted the wall fell back; others, finding themselves unsupported, gave way before the rush of their opponents, who dashed across the compound and thrust their bayonets fiercely upwards. For a moment the top of the wall was clear, but the defenders had fired their pieces, and Ahmed knew that a determined rush by the enemy must swamp the little band. The question was, Would this rush come before the men could reload? They were hard at work charging their muskets. He shouted to the Sikhs in the house to come to the support of their comrades, and then ran to the back to see how things were faring there.

Ahmed was surprised to find things very quiet in that direction. He heard the sound of a pistol-shot from above. The doctor had stationed himself at the back window, which had been partially shuttered, and fired one pistol while the khansaman loaded the other. He was a fine pistol-shot. The wall at the back prevented the mob in the narrow lane from firing at the window. But, as soon as a head showed itself above the wall, the doctor never failed to hit. For a few minutes the mutineers were baffled, but they soon rose to the situation, swarmed into a house on the other side of the lane, beyond pistol-shot, and began to fire at the shuttered window with their muskets. In a minute or two the doctor was forced from his position. A splinter from the woodwork had slightly wounded him; to stay where he was would have been merely to court death.

Once more the enemy in the lane were emboldened to climb the wall and gain the roof of the colonnade. They also swarmed into the gardens of the next houses, and began to mount the wall from three sides. One of the corporals had ordered the men to reserve their fire until the enemy began to

leap down into the garden, knowing that half-a-dozen men within were equal to many times their number dropping one by one from the roof of the colonnade. But the situation was now changed. It was not a question of two or three to one, but thirty or forty to one, and a very determined rush by the enemy might cut the men off from the house altogether. Ahmed saw the danger. Rushing across the garden, he called to the Sikhs to make a dash for the doorway. The men instantly obeyed; in the excitement of the moment they did not stop to question who it was that was giving them orders; it was instinctive with them to obey commands delivered in that sharp, decisive way. But the corporal did not understand the words: he only saw the Sikhs rushing back to the house; and he turned on Ahmed and began to ask, in the lurid vernacular of the British soldier, what he meant by interfering. There was no time to answer. The enemy seized this moment to charge. Ahmed with his sword cut down one of the men before he had recovered from his leap: the corporal's bayonet disposed of another. Then the Englishman became alive to the danger, and with Ahmed sprinted across the garden to the house. One of the Sikhs was waiting to slam the door as soon as they got through. Another, just behind, stood with levelled musket, and took a snap-shot at the man immediately behind Ahmed. The mutineer fell, tripping up the man following him, and giving Ahmed the fraction of a second that was necessary to slip in behind the corporal and bar the door. Two other Sikhs at once occupied the loopholes, and in another second or two their fire brought down two of the leading mutineers.

The doctor, meanwhile, had cried to the other men to post themselves at the back windows, the shutters of which also were loopholed, and they too fired among the throng now crowding into the garden from three sides. There were not wanting men of courage among the assailants, and several of them rushed up to the windows with the idea of firing through the loopholes, which were plainly to be seen, if only by the smoke filtering through them; but the inside of the house being higher than the outside, they were unable to reach high enough to get an aim. All they could do was to fire at the shutters, and a scattered volley of bullets thudded upon them. For the most part they embedded themselves in the woodwork. One or two actually penetrated the loopholes, but being fired from below, they failed to hit the men behind, who had retired slightly from the windows to reload.

The doctor shouted to the men to fire alternately, one reloading while the other fired. The mutineers crowding into the garden found themselves exposed to a deadly dropping of bullets of which they themselves could see the fatal results, while they were ignorant of what damage their own fire was doing. There was no cover in the garden except the fountain. Every part of it was commanded from the door or one or other of the windows; the fountain would at best shelter only one or two. They found that every bullet fired by the garrison meant the loss of one of their number. There were several rushes and attempts to batter in the door with the stocks of muskets, or to push the muzzles up through the loopholes, but these always met with the same fate as the first, although one Sikh was badly hit by a splinter.

While the men still kept up their fire, Ahmed rushed through to the front, whence he again heard the din of conflict. There had been another rush up the ladders, met by a fusillade and a charge by the garrison under the British corporal. Again the enemy had been hurled back. Ahmed arrived on the scene just in time to see the last man disappearing from the wall, transfixed by the corporal's bayonet.

Again there was silence both at the back and in front of the house. At the back the crowd of mutineers in the garden had been suddenly seized with panic, their comrades dropping one by one beneath the fire of the garrison without being able to do anything effectual in reply. They had swarmed back over the colonnade, and regained the lane behind or the gardens of the adjacent houses.

Ahmed seized the interval of quiet to hurry up to the doctor, whom he found somewhat shaken by his injury, but perfectly calm. He was, indeed, on the point of descending, to take more direct and effectual command than was possible from the room above.

"I have had a knock," he said, with a smile, "but I think I can manage to crawl down."

"Not so, sahib," said Ahmed. "They are good fighters, the men below, and the English naik is a very good man. But if the sahib would go to the roof perhaps he might call down word of what the Purbiyas are doing. The khansaman and I can help the sahib to go up."

"Chup! I am not so bad as that. Lend me your arm."

He went up, supported by Ahmed. Together they crawled across the roof to the parapet and peeped over. There was a confused hubbub below. In the street at the front of the house they saw Minghal Khan with a group of sepoys, but the greater part of the mob consisted of Irregulars, and their numbers were much increased since the beginning of the attack.

For a time there was a lull; but ere long it became apparent that the enemy were intending a new move. Men appeared on the roof of a house on the far side of the road opposite the doctor's gateway. Others at the same time crowded at the upper windows. A preliminary shot from one of the windows showed that the new position occupied by the enemy dominated the compound in front of the doctor's house, for one of the Sikhs was wounded by it. Indeed, the doctor wondered whether the men could be withdrawn safely from their position underneath the front wall. In running the gauntlet over the exposed portion of the compound, many of them would probably fall beneath the muskets of the enemy in the house opposite. Seeing for a moment that there was no threatening of danger from the direction of the lane at the rear, he bade Ahmed crawl over the roof and send the khansaman, who was acting as orderly, to summon four men from the back of the house. These he ordered to keep up a brisk fire on the men on the roof and at the windows of the house opposite. The doctor's house being higher than the latter, the enemy here were at a great disadvantage. They maintained the musketry duel for a few minutes, then vacated the position; but although the roof of the doctor's house was higher than that of the neighbouring buildings, with the exception of one at some little distance, it was not so much higher as to afford, with its low parapet, complete protection. A fusillade from several buildings at once would make the roof almost untenable, if only by reason of the splinters of brickwork.

That the enemy had realized the weakness of the position on the roof was evident some ten minutes later. Shots began to patter upon the parapet from several directions. The commanding building at a little distance was now occupied. Here the besiegers were on more level terms with the besieged, and bullets began to sing across the roof. First one man and then another was hit, either by bullets or by fragments of the parapet.

"This will never do," said the doctor. "We must go."

They crawled back to the trap-door and descended into the house. But in a moment the doctor saw that the evacuation of the roof would have serious consequences for the gallant band in the front compound. Unless the fire from the opposite house, now packed with marksmen, could be dominated, the next attack on the compound must inevitably succeed. As soon as its defenders showed themselves in attempting to charge the assailants from the wall, they would become the targets for muskets at no more than fifty or sixty yards' range.

"Run down and bring the men into the house," said the doctor.

Ahmed hastened below and gave the order in the sahib's name, adding a caution to beware of flying bullets. The men scampered back along the foot of the wall, crouching low. They were not visible from the opposite house until they had covered half the distance to the door; then the enemy espied their movement and fired a volley. But the men were going rapidly in single file; only one was struck, by a bullet rebounding from the wall, and in another ten seconds the whole band was safe within the house.

The withdrawal was not a moment too soon. There was suddenly a sound of many hammers falling upon steel. The enemy were making an attack upon the walls both at the front and back, driving iron spikes into them with the object of making loopholes. The walls were stoutly built, and it was a full quarter of an hour before the iron bars began to show on their inner side. In half-an-hour at least twenty loopholes had been pierced both in the front and back, and a continuous fusillade was kept up upon the shutters and doors of the house. As soon as one man fired outside, apparently his place was taken by another with a newly-loaded musket, and the new-comer only waited until the smoke had partially cleared to discharge his piece. The woodwork of the house was both thick and hard; only a small proportion of the bullets penetrated the interior; but the range was no more than thirty or forty yards, and there were many good marksmen among the sepoys. Two of the garrison standing behind the loopholes were struck, and one musket was rendered useless. The khansaman ran to inform the doctor, who had the injured men carried upstairs, where he extracted the bullets and bound up their wounds. For a few minutes more the work of loopholing the wall

continued, and the defences were battered with an uninterrupted hail of bullets. Gradually the shots found weak spots in the woodwork. Another man was hit, this time through a fissure torn in the shutter by a previous bullet. Every now and again a yell from the outside told that a bullet from the defences had made its way through the loopholes of the wall. These apertures were a good deal larger than those in the doors and shutters of the house, and offered a far better mark. The assailants could afford to lose twenty men to one of the besieged. And when the mutineers noticed that the firing from the house was less in volume owing to the casualties, they became more and more eager. The British columns had retired to their positions near the ramparts; the report had flown through the city that the fourth column had been annihilated; the rumour was spreading that the great Nikalsain himself was dead. The fanatical crowds in the streets still indulged a hope that the British would be repelled; and meanwhile, to Minghal Khan and his mob, it seemed that the little party in the house would ere long fall an easy prey.

The sultry afternoon was drawing on towards night. All sounds of combat elsewhere in the city had ceased. The attack upon the house had as yet failed: but the outworks had been rendered untenable, and the defence must now be confined to the house itself. It seemed that Minghal Khan was satisfied with what he had gained so far; for the firing suddenly ceased, and as darkness sank down upon the scene it appeared probable that the final assault was deferred until the morning. The doctor scarcely expected a night attack. The enemy had already suffered severely, and, numerous as they were, they were not likely to court the heavy losses that an assault in the dark upon strong defences must entail. That he was right was proved as time passed. A close watch was kept upon the house; fires were lighted both front and back; and men could be heard talking; but there was no sign of a renewal of the assault.

The little garrison was glad enough of the respite. They were tired out after the strain of work and fighting during the hot hours of the day. The doctor ordered all the men in turn to act as sentries, one at the back and one at the front, keeping watch while the others slept. It was only at the entreaty of the khansaman that he went to his own bed, and he insisted on being awaked at the first sign of movement among the enemy.

Day had hardly dawned when there came a great yelling from the street, and the rumble of distant wheels. The rumbling sound came nearer moment by moment until it suddenly stopped.

"Go to the roof," said the doctor to Ahmed. His face wore an expression of great anxiety. Ahmed hurried up through the trap-door and crawled to the parapet. He was at once seen from the roof of the loftiest house, and bullets pattered round him; but he looked over and saw—what he had expected to see. A gun had been brought down the street, and stood in the gateway of the house immediately opposite the gate of the compound. There were no horses: evidently the gun had been dragged to its position by men. The gunners were in the act of loading. Ahmed rushed back across the roof, with less caution than before, and was just descending through the trap-door when a bullet whizzed past his left ear, carrying away a lock of his thick hair. He leapt down the steps, and ran to acquaint the doctor with the new peril in which the house lay.

Dr. Craddock was perturbed. Neither the gate of the compound nor the door of the house, nor even the walls themselves, could stand a battering from round shot, and if a breach was once made the house would swarm with the fanatical mutineers, against whom resistance would be vain.

"We must spike the gun, sahib," said Ahmed.

"Impossible! You would rush to your death," replied the doctor.

"Nay, sahib, it must be done; and there is no time to be lost. Give the order, and we thy servants will obey."

The doctor turned, still hesitating, to one of the corporals and explained what Ahmed had suggested: he felt that he could hardly order so desperate an undertaking unless the men would volunteer.

"Spike the gun! Right you are, sir," said the corporal cheerfully. "Them Pandies never can stand a charge. We'll do it, by Jehosopher we will. Blowed if an Englishman is going to be licked by a blooming Pathan."

Ahmed had already seized a hammer and a heavy nail.

"Give them to me, you Pathan," cried the corporal.

"Let him alone," said the doctor. "Get all the men together: nine of you follow the Guide: the rest man the loopholes. Make your rush when they have fired the gun; quick! you haven't a moment to lose."

The whole garrison ran to the front door. Ahmed drew the bolts. The two corporals and seven of the Sikhs stood ready; the rest went to the loopholes. They had hardly taken their places when there was a tremendous roar; the gate of the compound was shattered to splinters; and through the gap and the smoke a crowd of yelling sepoys began to pour into the enclosure. But the men at the loopholes had their muskets ready: at a word from Ahmed they fired a volley, concentrating their aim on the gateway. The foremost of the besiegers fell, and those behind, taken aback by the sudden volley, paused. At that instant Ahmed flung wide the door, and dashed straight for the gate at the head of nine cheering men with fixed bayonets.

Pandy never waited for the touch of cold steel. There was a wild stampede from the gateway. The sepoys tumbled over one another in their panic. While the men behind were pushing on, those in front were pushing back. The crowd fell apart as the cheering band drove through them, and made a path through which Ahmed and the two corporals headed the rest towards the gun. The gunners stood as if paralyzed; before they could flee the bayonets had done their fell work.

Ahmed was on the point of spiking the gun when a sudden inspiration seized him. The gun had been partly prepared for the next charge. Round shot and grape lay ready. The mutineers up the street, charged by the Sikhs, were huddled together like a flock of sheep chased by a dog, and the space around the gun was clear. Ahmed dropped his hammer, and began to ram in a charge of grape.

"Right you are!" said one of the corporals, divining his intention. "We'll slew her round. Come on, Bill."

The two corporals with Ahmed's assistance rammed in the charge, and slewed the gun round so that it pointed down the street, where the crowd was already beginning to surge back. Then Ahmed snatched up the burning portfire that lay on the ground and applied it to the touch-hole.

There was a babel of yells from the throng as the shot sped among them. In so dense a crowd the havoc was terrific. The instant the gun was fired, before the smoke had cleared away, Ahmed drove his spike into the touch-hole, and raising his voice to its highest pitch shouted to the Sikhs to return. In a few moments the whole party was dashing back through the gateway into the compound. Bullets sang about their ears, fired from the neighbouring houses; but the smoke still lay thick over the street, giving them partial protection. One man was struck; him Ahmed and another caught up and carried between them. They were the last to reach the door, and had not entered when the crowd, frantic with rage at their losses and the spoiling of their weapon, came surging in at the gate. The door was shut just as the first of them, not stopping to fire, was making a fierce cut at Ahmed.

Breathless but exultant at the success of their desperate enterprise, Ahmed and the little party went to the loopholes and fired a volley at the assailants which again daunted them. But now a strident voice was heard among the shouts outside. Fierce yells answered it, growing in volume every moment.

"A fakir!" cried a Sikh.

"I've heard the like of that screeching in Seven Dials of a Saturday night," said one of the corporals.

"And, by gum, it means mischief," said the other. "He'll work those Pandies up into a perfect fury, Jack, and they'll be that mad they'd charge into hell."

"Well, screeches won't break down the door."

"No, but a battering-ram will, and dash me if the beggars haven't got one."

A score of mutineers were hauling a heavy log through the gateway. At the same moment there was a great uproar from the rear of the house. The attack in that quarter had not been resumed since the previous night, the rebels having apparently determined to concentrate on the front, trusting to win an easy victory with the aid of their gun. Owing to the casualties among the defenders, only ten men were now available, and the division of forces necessary to cope with simultaneous attacks in both front and rear laid a heavy handicap upon them. Half ran to the back to repel the assault. The furniture had already been massed against the door, and Ahmed saw with relief that by firing through the loopholes in the shutters the attackers could

for the present be held off. It was otherwise in front. Several of the men carrying the log were shot down, but others took their places before the defenders could reload, and the ram was launched against the timber. The whole building trembled under the impact, and though the door for the moment held fast, it was plain that it could not long withstand such a battery.

The doctor was alive to the situation. He called to the men to prepare for a rush up the staircase, bidding one of them get ready the nail-studded plank for laying lengthwise on the stairs. While the men were still holding their position at the loopholes, they heard the sound of wrenching woodwork above, and in a few minutes there was a large gap in the ceiling of the hall. Immediately afterwards there came from above the sharp sound of hammers on metal. Ahmed could not guess what the doctor and the khansaman were doing, but felt sure that whatever it was the defence would gain by it.

Meanwhile the battering on the front door had at last loosened the hinges; it was time to retire. Ahmed and the five men with him went a few steps up the staircase. Then he laid the plank on the treads, so that none of the enemy could mount without crossing five feet of sharp iron points. The massive timber withstood several more assaults before there was a final crash, and it hung half open, disclosing a part of the yelling crowd outside. Ahmed and his comrades were only dimly visible to the besiegers, while the latter in the open courtyard were in full view of the besieged. A second after the door burst open the six men on the stairs fired together. There was no chance of missing the densely packed throng—every shot claimed its victim. For a second or two the crowd recoiled. The little firing party ran up to the landing. Then the doctor, limping to the top of the stairs, gave directions to the khansaman to pour down the plank the contents of a huge blue bottle. Shots were whistling round them from the muskets of the rebels who had swarmed into the hall, but neither showed the slightest concern. Kaluja had just finished his work when, led by the shrieking fakir, the mob made a rush for the stairway. Several men, heedless of the nails, scrambled up for a foot or two. Then with shrill cries of rage and pain they jumped backwards, overturning their comrades who were pressing on behind them. The plank was smoking with the strong acid which the khansaman had poured upon it. Most of the mob were barefooted, and even their tough soles could not

withstand the effects of the burning liquid, the fumes from which set those above choking.

The hall was now packed tight with yelling rebels, so closely pressed together that to use their muskets was impossible. They had no escape from the shots fired by the men above as fast as they could reload. Then a new terror was added to the scene. Ahmed now saw the meaning of the knocking he had heard. Over the gap in the floor the khansaman had laid the doctor's sitz-bath, in the bottom of which he had pierced a number of holes. He was now engaged in emptying the contents of his master's bottles into the bath, the doctor adding water from time to time. It would have puzzled the most expert chemist to define the chemical composition which fell in a steady shower on the heads of the panic-stricken mutineers. The liquid fizzed and smoked, and changed colour like a chameleon—now green, now yellow, now brown, now an indescribable mixture of tints. There was only one desire among the discomfited enemy: to escape from this cockpit in which they suffered pangs due to the hakim's mysterious art as well as to the more familiar weapons of war. Pushing, shouting, scrambling over each other, they forced their way out into the compound, and there was such a wringing of hands and such a chorus of groans as surely Delhi had never heard or seen before.

The attack at the front had been effectually beaten off. The doctor hoped that the enemy would now retire altogether. But Ahmed ran up to the roof to see whether they were indeed withdrawing. The street was still full of rebels, and an excited altercation was going on among them. The central figures were Minghal Khan, who had hitherto been content to hound the men on without showing much eagerness to lead them, and the fakir, who bore many marks of the chemical baptism he had received. The uproar was too great to allow Ahmed to hear what was being said; he could only guess at it by the gesticulations of the men and by what happened afterwards. The fakir had, in fact, called on the fanatics who surrounded him, to bring combustibles for the burning of the house. Against this Minghal vehemently protested: the king's orders were that no houses should be fired: this would be only to assist the Feringhis. But the fakir scoffed at orders: it was the duty of all the faithful to destroy the infidels by any means in their power. Then Minghal used another argument: there was valuable property in the house—his property, his all. The fakir's answer to this was a horrible laugh,

and the taunt that Minghal had shown no disposition to go into the house and fetch his valuable property. Minghal was overborne. Devoted adherents of the fakir brought up shavings, pieces of wood, jars of oil. Then, waving his arms, his long beard dripping in many-coloured drops, the fakir led the shouting mob round to the lane at the back. Not even he cared to face the front again.

Ahmed was descending to inform the doctor of this new move, when he stopped suddenly. A fresh sound had caught his ear: the sound of firing, both artillery and musketry, far away. Were the British columns renewing their assault? Was Colonel Jones forcing his way through the city again towards the mosque? His heart leapt with a great hope. The mutineers were coming to fire the house: nothing could prevent them; but rather than die like rats in a trap, he and his comrades must make a dash through the compound, and try to cut their way towards their friends. Suddenly he remembered the doctor. He could not take part in such a sortie. He must not be abandoned. The idea must be given up: there was nothing for it but to hold out to the last moment.

The roofs and windows of the surrounding houses were deserted. No doubt their former occupants had learnt that the house was to be fired and had joined the mob below, hoping for a share in the expected butchery and plunder. Here was a chance of dealing the enemy a last blow. Through the trap-door Ahmed called to the men to bring up his musket and join him. The mob was already pouring down the lane behind the fakir—hundreds of men in the frenzied zeal of fanaticism. They came to the garden wall and began to swarm over it; some burst in the gate; they flocked through in numbers too great to be checked by the fire of the ten men above. A volley flashed; Ahmed took aim at the fakir: he and the men nearest him fell. Those behind leapt over their prostrate bodies, and with fierce cries threw themselves against the door. Once more the ten fired among them; then Ahmed saw that men were again appearing on the roof of the nearest house, and before the little party all descended through the trap-door a Sikh and one of the corporals were hit.

When the others reached the doctor, they found him quietly preparing a bomb. He had filled a canister with powder, attached a roughly-made fuse, and was about to light it and fling the bomb among the enemy. At the sight

of it an alternative scheme flashed into Ahmed's mind. He quickly explained it to the doctor, then hurried away through the almirah into the secret chamber below. Placing the table on the doctor's charpoy, he mounted on it, and laid the canister in a little ventilating recess just below the fountain. Then he lit the fuse and rushed away, slamming the door behind him.

He was only half-way up the stairs when he heard the back door burst in with a crash. Immediately afterwards there was a terrific report, that shook the house. He ran back, waited a minute or two to allow the fumes of the explosion to clear away, and re-entered the room. It was a wreck. The fountain had fallen into it, and it was choked with rubbish. Creeping over obstacles he saw a gap above his head, through which, by and by, it might be possible to reach the garden. He hurried back to the surgery. Whatever might have happened to the crowd in the garden, those who had entered the house had kindled a fire; the room was already full of smoke. In another minute all the little company had descended the spiral stairs to the secret room, leaving the wall of the surgery closed behind them. Below they would be safe for a time, the underground room being connected with the house only by the stone staircase.

Meanwhile the mutineers, daunted by the sudden explosion, had withdrawn to the further side of the garden. Some in terror had recrossed the wall; but the fire was alight; there had been no sign of any attempt at escape on the part of the garrison; and the fanatical throng exulted in the belief that ere long their victims would be consumed with the house.

Half-an-hour passed. The waiting men noticed that the uproar above, which had diminished, now broke out again with redoubled clamour. And it was not yells of execration and of triumph, but the cries of men in fight, mingled with the sound of musketry. Ahmed ventured to mount on the heap of rubbish towards the small gap where the fountain had been. He came to the surface, and as he put his head cautiously out, the first sight that met his eyes was a red-coated British officer, with flashing sword, chasing the darwan across the garden. The chase was brief; the man fell; and the officer, turning to rejoin his men, caught sight of Ahmed, who had crawled out of the hole and was running towards him. He came with outstretched sword to deal with another mutineer, as he supposed, and observing the khaki

uniform, hastened his step with a muttered imprecation: it was a new thing for the wearers of the khaki to turn traitors. But Ahmed drew himself up and stood at the salute.

"Hazur," he said, "there is a sahib below, and I am of Lumsden Sahib's Guides."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH

Duty

Three months had passed. The Guides were on their homeward march to Hoti-Mardan. They had spent a busy three months in breaking up the numerous bands formed by rebels who escaped from Delhi. For Delhi had fallen; the old king was a prisoner; and, though Lucknow still held out against Sir Colin Campbell, the back of the Mutiny was broken.

Ahmed rejoined his corps the same day on which he and the little party in Dr. Craddock's house were relieved. He was with them on those six succeeding days when the rebels, disputing every foot of ground against the British columns, were finally routed, and the British flag flew on the palace of the Moguls. Amongst the greater doings of that week, the exploit of the handful of men who defended the doctor's house against Minghal Khan's horde passed almost unnoticed, save by the persons more immediately concerned. Dr. Craddock did not make light of it: he took care to bring it to the notice of the officers of the regiments to which the men belonged, and they were all mentioned in regimental orders. Ahmed himself was promoted dafadar, to the mingled delight and envy of Sherdil; and Dr. Craddock, before he left to rejoin his daughter in Karnal, presented him with his gold watch as a memento. And when the Guides passed through Karnal on their return march, Mary Craddock did not fail to thank Ahmed herself for what he had done for her father. The doctor, for his part, who had heard from Mary the full story of her rescue, was at his wit's end to know how to show his gratitude. Ahmed would not accept money from him. Ultimately he accepted a pair of gold bracelets of great value which had belonged to Mrs. Craddock, and which the doctor suggested he might present to his wife when he married. He was sorely tempted then to reveal his English parentage; but resolved to keep silence until he knew the fate of Rahmut Khan, of whom he had heard nothing since he left Delhi.

And now the Guides had come within a week's march of Peshawar. They had covered the distance from Delhi in very different conditions from those

of their historic march to the beleaguered city. They left Delhi on December 18—that was more than six weeks ago. There had been little fighting on the way, but news had just come to Captain Daly at his bivouac just outside Rawal Pindi, that a small convoy was hard pressed by a strong body of mutineers about ten miles distant. The cavalry at once saddled up and galloped off to the rescue. Dusk was falling when they approached the scene of the fight. They walked their horses for some distance so that they might recover their wind; then, being almost within sight of the hamlet into which the convoy had thrown itself, they dashed forward at a hand gallop. Just outside the hamlet they came upon a large number of horses, which had been left in charge of a few mutineers. Hearing the thud of the approaching hoofs, these men fled in hot haste, leaving the led horses to their fate. It was clear that the attack on the hamlet was being made on foot. As the Guides dashed past the abandoned horses they stampeded in terror.

The mutineers were endeavouring to force a barricade of carts which the escort of the convoy had thrown across the street, and which was flanked on each side by a house. So sudden was the approach of the Guides that the assailants were taken utterly by surprise. Their first instinct was to rush for their horses, but the Guides barred the way. They scattered to right and left, seeking refuge in the wild undergrowth that covered the surrounding country. Captain Daly ordered Ahmed to take a dozen sowars in pursuit, strictly enjoining him to keep the men well in hand, and not to ride far, since night was almost upon them. It was nearly dark when he returned, having accounted for many of the fugitives, though many more had escaped in the gloom.

He had just come within sight of the village when he heard loud shouts of "Catch him! Catch him!" and saw a horseman galloping across the field at his left. He wheeled his horse and set off in pursuit. The fugitive had a few hundred yards' start, and, riding for his life, sped on at a breakneck pace that took no account of the rough country. Ahmed was riding his own horse, Ruksh, and was surprised and somewhat nettled to find that he did not immediately gain on the quarry. Horseman and steed were well matched: none but a consummately skilful rider would risk such a pace in the growing darkness. Ahmed warmed to the chase: the fugitive might be of importance, and he was determined to capture him. There were sounds of others joining in the pursuit when he first set off, but as Ahmed rode on

with a recklessness equal to the fugitive's, these sounds gradually became fainter and fainter; Ruksh was still the best horse in the regiment.

On went the two horsemen. Ahmed could just see the fugitive ahead, bending low on the saddle, skirting obstacles in bush and tree. He felt that for his own credit and that of Ruksh the man must be caught. Patting his horse's head and speaking in his ear, he persuaded the noble animal to still greater efforts, and in a few moments saw with joy that the gap between himself and the enemy was lessening. Even Ruksh seemed to share his exhilaration; he lifted his head and bounded forward at still greater speed. Only fifty yards separated pursuer and pursued, when suddenly Ahmed heard a heavy thud; then there was silence; the hoofs of the horse in front no longer rang on the rough ground. Ahmed checked Ruksh's pace and drew his pistol. A few seconds later he saw a dark form on the ground two or three yards ahead. He reined up sharply, and walked his horse forward, keenly on the alert for an ambuscade. But on drawing nearer he recognized that the form was that of a horse; it lay at the edge of a narrow nullah. And just beyond there was another motionless form, without doubt its rider. What had happened was clear. The horseman had come unawares on the nullah; the horse had stumbled and shot its rider over its head.

Ahmed was too good a scout to relax his vigilance; it was needful to be wary in approaching even a thrown man. Pistol in hand, he made a circuit of the prostrate figure. The man lay motionless, his face to the ground. Choosing such a position that the fugitive, if shamming, would have to turn round before he could fire, Ahmed slipped from his horse, which stood still at the word of command, and moved forward to see who the captive might be.

He laid his hand on the man, who made no movement. Then he turned him over, and saw by his long white beard that he was an older man than he had supposed. Striking a light with flint and steel, for in the dark it was impossible to see whether the man was dead or merely insensible, he was amazed to see that his helpless captive was Rahmut Khan. Hastily he unslung his water-bottle, poured some drops between the old chief's lips, and dashed the rest in his face. There was a groan.

"Dog, let me die!" murmured the old man.

"Father, dost thou not know me? It is Ahmed, thy son."

The chief seemed at first too much dazed to understand what was said, but as he regained his senses he gave utterance to a cry of wonderment and delight.

"Is it indeed thee, Ahmed-ji?" he said. "Praise to the Most Merciful! I supposed it was one of the Feringhi dogs. Praise to Allah! Now thou and I can go together in peace, and do what must be done to that thrice-accursed reptile, Dilasah Khan."

Ahmed felt a great pity for the old man, ignorant of all that had happened to his adopted son during the past year.

"Nay, father," he said tenderly, "it may not be. I am of Lumsden Sahib's Guides; I was sent to catch thee: needs must I give thee up."

"Of the Guides, sayest thou? Hast thou, then, eaten of the accursed Feringhis' salt?"

"I have indeed eaten of it, my father."

"Hast thou told them that thou art thyself of Feringhi blood?" asked the old man anxiously.

"Nay, father, none knows it save Sherdil, son of Assad, and he has held his peace."

"Verily I love thee, my son. But having eaten of the Feringhis' salt, thou must be true to it. I will go back with thee."

Ahmed examined him, to make sure that no bones were broken, then went back to the nullah to find his horse. Seeing that the beast's knees were fractured, he shot him through the head, then returned and set Rahmut on Ruksh. And thus he led him back to camp.

On the way explanations were exchanged. Rahmut had been imprisoned at Agra, and when, at the outbreak of the Mutiny, the town was isolated, all communications being cut off by the rebels, the authorities, fearing an attack on the prison as at Meerut, conveyed all the prisoners across the Jumna and released them. The chief was on his way back to Shagpur when

he learnt that Dilasah had made himself master of the place, and that Ahmed had gone, none knew whither. Incensed at the British, to his imprisonment by whom he ascribed these misfortunes, he cast in his lot with the rebels, gathered by sheer force of character a band of desperadoes, and led them to Delhi. And then Ahmed told all that had happened to him, and the part that Minghal Khan had played. The old chief was amazed to hear that his son was incarcerated in Minghal's house at the very time when he made his attack on it.

"And where is that dog of dogs?" he cried. "Oh, that Allah had given me to slay him with my own hands!"

"I know not," said Ahmed. "When the sahibs saved us at the house, he was gone. I searched for him among the slain, but saw him not."

"Peradventure I may yet find him, and then shall he receive the due reward of his deeds."

Before they reached the village, they were joined by men of Ahmed's party, who had been searching for him in the dark. They took Rahmut with them to camp, and Ahmed handed him over to Captain Daly when he made his report. If the chief had been a mutineer he would no doubt have been shot at once; but as he had never been in the British service, Captain Daly decided to take him on to Peshawar for judgment by Sir John Lawrence. He praised Ahmed for his successful work, and ordered him to place the prisoner under guard.

A little while afterwards Ahmed returned to his commander's tent and asked to be allowed to speak to him. He was admitted.

"Well, dafadar, what is it?" asked Daly.

"With your good pleasure, sahib, I will now leave the Guides."

"What?"

"I wish to be no longer a Guide, sahib."

"Why, what's the meaning of this nonsense? You can't leave the Guides."

"With your pardon, sahib, I must. The sahib will remember that we of the Guides are always free to leave the sahibs' service if we please. It is one of the conditions."

"That's true; but nobody does it. What's your reason? Are you dissatisfied? You are the youngest dafadar in the corps, and if you go on as you have begun, you'll be a risaldar before I shall."

"I am not dissatisfied, sahib. But Rahmut Khan is my father."

Captain Daly stared.

"That is it, is it?" he said. "I see." He was silent for a few moments, then he said, "Well, dafadar, you can't resign at a minute's notice, and in war-time. We may be attacked any day, and until we reach head-quarters I consider it your duty to stand by the corps. When we get to head-quarters you can speak of it again."

He watched Ahmed narrowly. The boy's face showed his disappointment, but, as Daly had guessed, the point of honour appealed to him, and thanking the officer, he saluted and went his way.

A week later the corps marched into Peshawar. The whole garrison was paraded to receive them. Major-General Sir Sidney Cotton, in command of the station, ordered a royal salute to be fired in their honour, and the troops on parade came to the salute as they marched in amid the strains of the massed bands. The General delivered an eloquent address, speaking of the pride every man felt in the heroic achievements of the corps, which had lost more than half its strength in the work around Delhi, and whose whole complement of officers had been renewed four times, not one of them being unwounded. Then he called for three cheers for the war-worn and ragged warriors, and amid a salvo of artillery and resounding hurrahs the Guides rode at the head of the line and marched past the flag.

That night, at the banquet given by Colonel Herbert Edwardes in celebration of the Guides' return, Captain Daly told those about him of the strange incident that had lately happened. It made a deep impression on his audience; every Englishman felt a touch of pride in the spirit of loyalty which set duty to the corps before ties of kinship. Every one felt that while England could command the services of men like these, they need have no fear of the permanence of the British raj.

Next day Ahmed and his father were both summoned to attend at the residence of Sir John Lawrence. General Cotton and the officers of the Guides and others were with him.

Sir John looked very stern as he addressed the old chief, who stood with natural dignity before him.

"You were taken in arms, Rahmut Khan," he said. "You had no grievance against us; your imprisonment was just. You know what penalty is suffered by those who have acted like you?"

"I know it, Jan Larrens," said the chief.

"Have you anything to say for yourself—any reason why you should not suffer likewise?"

"None, Jan Larrens. If I were Jan Larrens, and you were Rahmut Khan, I should without doubt speak even as you speak."

"Fine old fellow!" said one of the officers quietly to his neighbour.

"And you," said Lawrence, turning to Ahmed—"you are the son of this man. Have I not seen you before?"

"It is true, sahib; I came here a year ago to beg for my father's release, and you refused."

"And then you joined the Guides; why did you do that?"

"You said, sahib, that my petition must be refused. I had no claim on the British raj. In my mind I said I will do something to win such a claim. And

Sherdil, son of Assad, being my friend, I thought nothing better could befall me than to become like him one of Lumsden Sahib's Guides."

"Ah! You wanted to do something to establish a claim on us. Captain Daly, what is this man's regimental record?"

Ahmed drew a long breath. He felt the eyes of Jan Larrens and the officers fixed on him. What would be the end of this?

Captain Daly began to read from a book—his name, the date when he entered the corps, trifling details of his early service which he had forgotten. Then came a more important matter.

"'First gave information of a fakir tampering with the Mohammedan members of the corps.'"

"That was your duty, was it not?" said Lawrence.

"Yes, sahib."

Captain Daly went on—

"'Rescued Dr. Craddock's daughter from a native near Karnal, dashed through a half-troop of rebels to bring assistance!'"

"Very meritorious. Still, you thought it your duty?" said Lawrence.

"It is true, sahib."

"'Went into Delhi in disguise,'" pursued the captain, "'at the orders of Lieutenant Hodson. Was the first to bring word of the mutineers' attack on Alipur. Sent other information. Discovered the whereabouts of Dr. Craddock!'"

"Excellent," said Lawrence. "You obeyed orders; other Guides would have done the same?"

"It is true, sahib."

"'Acted as guide to the second column at the assault of September 14. Took part in the defence of Dr. Craddock's house against the mutineers. Doctor gives high commendation; marked for promotion!'"

"Exceedingly good; but, as far as I can see, all in your duty. You are promoted, I observe; you have established no special claim upon the Government?"

There was a deep silence. The officers watched Ahmed keenly; would he now break through his reticence?

"No, sahib," he said simply.

"'Rawal Pindi,'" read Captain Daly. "'Captured the notorious freebooter Rahmut Khan.'"

"Ah! Now we have something," said Lawrence. "But that was your duty, too?"

"Yes, sahib," said Ahmed. "And now if it pleases the hazurs, I will leave the Guides."

"I understand that that is your wish. What is your reason?"

"Rahmut Khan is my father, sahib."

"But your claim; do you give that up?"

"It is my duty, sahib."

A smile went round the group. This was turning the tables on the Chief Commissioner. But Lawrence's expression did not change. He turned to the old chief, who had stood restlessly at Ahmed's side during this conversation.

"Rahmut Khan," he said, "what will you do if, for your son's sake, we pardon you?"

The chief's eyes flashed.

"I will go back to Shagpur, my village, Jan Larrens," he said, "and first slay that vile son of a dog, Dilasah, and after that I will seek Minghal Khan till I find him, and when I have slain him I shall be ready to die."

The officers smiled again—a smile not of derision, or even amusement, but rather of appreciation of the directness and honesty of the fearless old chief.

"Well, then," said Lawrence, "we pardon you, on this condition: that you go back to your village and trouble us no more. And if you keep good order, and help to maintain the peace of the frontier, we shall hold you as a friend to the British raj, and that will be for your good. And now," he added, turning to Ahmed, "do you still wish to leave the Guides?"

"No, sahib; there is no need." His face was bright with pleasure.

"What would you have done if Daly Sahib had allowed you to resign?"

"Sahib, I should have released my father."

The whole company of officers burst into a chuckling laugh; even Sir John's stern features relaxed.

"I am glad there is no need for that. Captain Daly, I think this young man's loyalty to the corps in such circumstances merits recognition. Perhaps you will make a note of his name for the first vacancy in the commissioned ranks."

He stepped from his seat and held out his hand to the Pathan chief. Rahmut grasped it, hesitated a moment, then said in a voice he with difficulty controlled—

"Jan Larrens, I have a thing to say. It is meet I say it. These nine years it has been locked in my heart, but the deeds of Ahmed Khan and thy kindness have proven both as a key. Ahmed Khan is the son of my heart, but not of my body. He is one of yourselves. He is a Feringhi."

And then he told the story of Ahmed from the time he had been snatched from his father's murderers. It was characteristic of the old chief that, even though Minghal Khan was his enemy, he did not disclose the fact that it was he who had murdered Mr. Barclay.

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated the astonished Englishman. "What is the boy's name!"

"Barkelay, if that is the Feringhis' way of saying it."

"By George!" ejaculated Colonel Herbert Edwardes. "I knew George Barclay; so did you, Sir John; in fact, I'm not sure I haven't played ride-a-

cock horse with this youngster on my knee. The whirligig of time!—my word, it's a queer world."

Rahmut Khan was submitted to a searching cross-examination. There was no doubt about the matter: Sir John Lawrence was convinced that Ahmed was indeed George Barclay's son. Having made his confession, the old chief found it difficult to control his emotion as he contemplated the loss of the heir upon whom his pride and affection were centred. The officers meanwhile had grouped themselves about Ahmed, and plied him with questions, seeking to revive recollections of his childhood.

"What's his real name, I wonder?" said Captain Daly. "Chief, what did Barclay Sahib call the boy?"

"Jorkins," replied Rahmut.

The officers roared.

"Of course!" cried Colonel Edwardes. "Poor Barclay had a mania for nicknames. And by George! what was that nonsense I used to rattle off: it used to amuse the boy's mother—

> "There was a little Jorkins,
> And he had a little pork ins-
> Ide his little tummy,
> And bellowed for his mummy,
> And howled for his daddy,
> Who caught him drinking madi,
> And said the nasty toddy
> Was bad for his little body——"

"How long did that go on, Edwardes?" interrupted some one.

"It never ended; I had to reel off a fresh instalment at every visit. Poor old Barclay!"

Ahmed was dazed at all this and the dim memories which the long-forgotten doggrel revived. Looking at Edwardes, he fancied he remembered the tall jolly officer, brimming over with jokes, whose visits were so

welcome. But he perceived the distress of Rahmut Khan, and asked permission to take him away.

When the Guides marched to Hoti-Mardan Ahmed was not among them. It had been decided that he should leave almost immediately for England, where he would find relatives of his father and mother, and where a small property awaited its owner. He took leave very cordially, yet with regret, of his comrades of the corps. Sherdil hugged the belief that Ahmed's good fortune was due mainly to the coaching he had had when a candidate for the Guides, and begged that his pupil would never forget it. Rahmut Khan remained for a week in Peshawar, made much of by the British officers, who vied with each other in entertaining him. The old man then set off on his lonely way back to Shagpur. He maintained his composure throughout his farewell interview with Ahmed; but Ahmed knew what strength of feeling was masked by his self-control.

A few weeks later Ahmed embarked for England. It had been discovered that Dr. Craddock and his daughter were leaving for home, and the doctor willingly undertook the office of guardian. He had known Ahmed's father; it was the likeness between them which had awakened a vague remembrance of having seen Ahmed before. With these good friends Ahmed Khan left the shores of India, but among the passengers who disembarked at St. Katharine's Docks there was no one of that name; he had become accustomed to hearing himself called Mr. James Barclay.

EPILOGUE

It is a bleak, raw day in November, 1863. A field force of all arms, under Sir Neville Chamberlain, is encamped in the rocky country of Umbeyla; their duty is to punish the tribesmen who, led by a fierce and fanatical mullah, have long been giving trouble. Above their camp towers an abrupt and precipitous rock, known as the Crag, and its summit is held by a picket of the 1st Panjab Infantry, a hundred and twenty strong. Twice already has the enemy, creeping up in thousands on the other side from the lower hills, driven the picket from its post, and twice has the position been recaptured at the point of the bayonet. And on this 13th of November the wild tribesmen have for the third time swarmed up to the attack, in such overwhelming force that the Crag's handful of defenders is driven back, and comes in full flight down the narrow rocky path that leads to the encampment below.

A panic seizes the camp-followers; they run hither and thither, crying that all is lost. But detachments of the Guides and the 1st Panjab Infantry gallantly climb the steep ascent, and press doggedly up and up in face of a murderous fire from the summit. They have nearly reached the top; but what can a few hundreds, even of British troops, do against the horde of fierce warriors above them? They halt; their leader sends down word that he can barely hold his own, much less retake the Crag, and asks for supports. He is almost giving way when up comes Major Ross with more Guides and more Panjabis, who scale the precipitous bluff and almost gain the crest. They, too, are checked; the dauntless fanatics above will not yield; their numbers are continually increased, and with furious and exultant cries they withstand every assault upon their vantage ground.

From the camp below Sir Neville Chamberlain watches the fight. The moment is critical; if the enemy maintain their hold on the Crag he will have to retire. It must be retaken at all costs. He orders the 101st Royal Bengal Fusiliers to the front, and more companies of the Guides; and since this is no ground for cavalry work, let the troopers dismounted share in the assault. The gallant fellows are nothing loath. Up they go, lightly as only

hill-men can. Heedless of the bullets that shower among them, they force their way steadily to the crest, and then the word is given to charge.

The line sweeps forward with a cheer—the infantry with fixed bayonets, the troopers with lance and sword. They dash full into the midst of the brave enemy; there is a shock, a slight check, and then the tribesmen falter, give back, and are driven down the slope.

The victors press on in pursuit. Some fleet-footed fellows outstrip the rest. Look at that black-bearded Guide running to overtake with his lance one of the fleeing men! Ah! he stumbles over a rock, staggers, falls at full length; and the fugitive, but a yard or two ahead, turns to cleave him as he lies. Two or three join him; he has his sword uplifted to strike, when a British lieutenant runs up and fells him with a pistol-shot. His comrades close round and beset the Englishman, four to one. Dafadar Sherdil Khan attempts to rise, but one of the enemy deals him a blow that disables him. The officer flings his pistol at the head of one man, then with his sword wards off the desperate thrusts of the others. If he stands merely on the defensive he will be overborne by numbers: there is no help at hand. Gathering his strength he rushes into the midst of the group. It breaks apart; in an instant he springs to the man on the right and cuts him down. Then he turns to deal with the rest. One is running again to the prostrate dafadar. With great leaps the lieutenant makes after him, and reaches him just in time to prevent the fatal blow. And then, as the Englishman turns once more to face the odds, a handful of the Royal Bengals come up at the double, and sweep upon the hapless tribesmen; not one of them escapes.

James Barclay had returned to his corps. Many of his old friends were gone, but Sherdil remained, and none was more delighted than he to welcome Ahmed Khan, after his five years' absence, as a British officer. And when, at Hoti-Mardan, some months after the fight at the Crag, it became known that Lieutenant Barclay of the Guides had been awarded the little bronze cross "For Valour," it was Sherdil, whose life he had saved, that led the troopers in their round of cheers.

Lieutenant Barclay did not forget to visit his adoptive father. Old Ahsan, bent, and very frail, knew him before he reached the gate, and his withered face beamed as he saluted him: "Salaam, hazur: truly Allah is great!"

Rahmut Khan gave him a royal welcome.

"Still art thou my son!" he cried, "and the sight of thee is very good."

He had loyally held to his compact with Jan Larrens, and the British raj had no warmer friend on the frontiers than he. Age had laid its icy finger on him; the tale of his years was well-nigh told. Only one thing troubled his peace of mind: neither Dilasah nor Minghal Khan had tasted his vengeance. Dilasah had fled from the village at the first news that the chief was returning home; and of Minghal, though he had sought diligently, he had discovered no trace.

Barclay wondered whether the two men, like Nana Sahib and Bakht Khan and other figures in the great rebellion, had disappeared for ever. But a year or so later, when he was being shown over the jail at Agra by the governor, he was taken to see two notorious ruffians who were serving a term of fifteen years' imprisonment for highway robbery with violence. And remembering that Rahmut Khan had been imprisoned in that very jail, he thought it a just retribution when he recognized, in the two fettered prisoners tramping round and round at the pole of the oil-mill, Dilasah and Minghal Khan. He sent word of his discovery to the old chief, and in due time received an answer written by the village scribe, Dinga Ghosh.

"The house of the wicked shall not prosper. I would I had slain them; but what must be, will be. Allah be with thee!"



GLOSSARY

The vowels are pronounced (approximately) as in German. The accent indicates a long vowel.

almirah, cupboard.

ayah, nurse, lady's-maid.

badmásh, bad character, hooligan.

bakr-id, Mohammedan festival in honour of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Ishmael (not Isaac, as in the Bible story).

bang, or *bhang*, an intoxicating drink.

banijárá, trader.

bariya, swordgrinder.

bas, enough.

bázár, market-place.

begam, lady of rank (Musalmán).

bhatiyárá, innkeeper.

bhisti, water-carrier.

chapáti, thin unleavened cake.

chaprási, messenger.

charpoy, bedstead.

chit, note.

chogah, sleeveless cloak of camel's hair.

chup, silence!

dafadár, sergeant of cavalry (native).

darbár, king's court, levée.

darwán, doorkeeper.

dasturi, commission.

dhoti, the cloth garment worn by Hindus.

Dín, the religious duties of Musalmans; the word is used as their war-cry in fighting against infidels.

dooli, a swinging litter.

eo, hail!

fakir, Mohammedan religious mendicant.

Feringhi, European.

galá, throat.

ghi, clarified butter.

Gujars, a tribe of robbers.

hakim, doctor.

hazur, lord.

hilo mat, don't move.

jaldi karo, quickly do; hurry up.

jamádár, lieutenant of cavalry (native).

jasail, Pathan musket.

-ji, affix implying affection = dear.

jin, spirit, goblin.

káfir, unbeliever.

kala pani, black water, the sea.

kásid, courier.

khabar, news.

Khán, prince; a title commonly added to Pathan names.

khánsámán, butler, head servant.

khitmutgar, table servant.

koss, about two miles.

kotwál, chief of the police; *kotwáli*, police head-quarters.

lákh, 100,000.

lathi, stick, club; *lathi-wallah*, man armed with a club.

lotah, brass pot.

mádi, toddy extracted from the cocoa-palm.

maulavi, learned Musalman and spiritual guide.

mirzá, prefixed to Mogul names = prince.

mlecha, or *mlechchha*, foreigner.

mullah, official who leads the prayers in a mosque.

munshi, writer, secretary.

náik, corporal.

nassar, or *nazar*, offering by an inferior to a superior.

pagri, turban.

palki, palanquin, closed carriage borne on poles.

Pathán, Afghan, whether in Afghanistan or immigrant in India.

Peshwá, prime minister and actual sovereign of the Maráthá kingdom.

pice, copper coin = quarter anna = about one farthing.

pulao, a savoury stew.

Purbiya, man from Eastern Bengal.

ráj, rule.

risáldár, officer commanding troop of horse.

ryot, peasant.

sahib-log, the sahib people = British.

sais, groom.

sárbán, camel-driver.

sayid, descendant of Ali, son-in-law of Mahomet.

serai, inn.

shigram, carriage.

shikári, hunter.

Shiva, third person of the Hindu trinity.

shroff, banker.

sirkar, or *sarkár*, government.

sowar, or *sawár*, trooper.

súar ká bachcha, son of a pig.

subahdár, high officer.

talwár, sword.

tamáshá, entertainment, jollification.

wallah, an affix denoting a person closely connected with the thing expressed by the word to which it is affixed—*competition wallah* =

candidate; *palki-wallah* = palki-bearer.

zamindar, landowner.

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